VIPER
THE UNMASKED SERIES
FANNY LEE SAVAGE

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VIPER

THE UNMASKED SERIES #4

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For all you good girls (and boys) who call the trigger warnings a spicy menu, think the redder the flag the hotter and more dedicated the man (or woman), and that primal play is flirting...
This book is for you.

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To the FBI agent assigned to me…
This book right here is why I was researching all that shady stuff.
Please take me off that list.

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Content Warning

Book four, and here we are, another content warning and another spicy menu. This will not contain a full list of warnings. My website has a full, detailed list.

This book is the darkest one yet and contains acts of violence, un-a-living, and ab*se that may upset some readers. Please know I have taken the topics discussed and portrayed in this book seriously and handled them with respect.

That being said, Viper's story is deeply upsetting and full of extreme childhood trauma. But it's also full of love, self-acceptance, and discovery.

THEMES: dark, MMMFFM, revenge, bi-awakening, mafia, why choose

CONTENT:

Explicit sex, including MM, MMMFM, MMF scenes.

Primal play

Cream-pie cleanup

Degradation and praise

DVP

Use of weapons

People are un-a-lived on page

Mention of the loss of parents

G0re

SA (not clearly depicted on page)

Sadomasochism (sexual pleasure from violence/ inflicting pain *not the fun kind*)

Attempted SA

Desecration of an un-a-lived person

Mutilation

Religious abuse

S*xual coercion

Alcohol use and abuse

Voyeurism

NOT DEPICTED ON PAGE

Hinted at but again *not* depicted.

SA/coercion (including min*rs)

Corporal punishment

Death of a min*r

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Playlist

Smashing Pumpkins - Bullet With Butterfly Wings
Sleep Token - Dangerous
Francis Doom - Somewhere Nowhere
Ex Habit - Who Do You Want
David Kushner - Darkerside
BAD OMENS - Left For Good
Francis Doom - Creep (Cover)
Tommee Profitt/Fleurie - Turns You into Stone
Mehro - whore
Sleep Token - Rain
Mehro - You're So Pretty
YUNGBLUD - Zombie
Ex Habit - let me fall
Sleep Token - Dark Signs
Thomas LaRosa - Scream My Name
Jared Benjamin - i'm the Sinner
Sleep Token - Emergence
Rosenfeld - Like U
SYML - Wake
Shinedown - Simple Man (Acoustic)
Artemas - southbound
SYML - Something Beautiful and Bright
The Toadies - Possum Kingdom
BAD OMENS - Specter
Josie Edwards - Good Girls
Erin LeCount - Marble Arch
PHILDEL - The Procession
Jared Benjamin - Midnight Sky
BAD OMENS - Never Know (Unplugged)

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Glossary

Otets – Father: Russian
Syn – Son: Russian
Soldat – Soldier: Russian
Mo Leannan – Sweetheart: Scottish Gaelic
Madadh-ruadh – Red Fox: Scottish Gaelic
Mo ghràdh – My Love: Scottish Gaelic
Mo chidre – My Heart: Scottish Gaelic

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Chapter 1

Viper

8 Years Ago, August, Age 24

GHOSTS TRAVEL ALONG THE path with me, whispering foul prayers at my back. The scent of damp earth and lavender clings to the fall air, taking me back to the year I spent in this hellish place. Each memory rakes along my spine like bony fingers, begging for my attention. But I ignore them, navigating the rocky terrain, focusing on the dark copse of trees ahead. My boot slips on the rocks littering the trail, and his hand lands on my lower back, steadying me. It takes everything not to shove him away.

My body craves him too much.

And right now, I can't deal with how my nerve endings snap with fiery awareness when he touches me. Much less his wants and needs and insecurities.

"Are you—" Breaker stops speaking as I stalk forward, putting space between us, leaving him and Striker behind.

His hand falls away, and the cool air seeps back in, replacing his warmth and I hate how much I instantly miss his touch. He's too consuming, chipping away at the stone wall I placed between us. With his dark skin, tight blue Henley, and jeans that hug his perfect ass, he's difficult to ignore. The constant longing he rouses in me feels perfectly sinful in this place. But that's not why I'm avoiding him. It's so I don't have to see, yet again, the flash of hurt that no doubt crossed his face.

My specialty. Hurting him and moving on.

Keeping my eyes trained on the hilltop, I push on, trying to forget the agony that marked his handsome face in that hotel room a few months ago. When I fucking ripped his heart out. When I denied not just him, but myself, everything I so desperately want. I'm too much of a coward to admit that those lectures from Father burrowed under my skin and planted seeds of disgust.

At myself. At this ache that lives in me to have him.

"I thought they said it was at the top of this hill," Striker says, following a few steps behind us. The sudden intrusion of his deep voice rips me from my thoughts. "Shouldn't we see it by now?"

"It's just up ahead," I say, continuing up the path, shoulders hunched against the wind. It howls today, just as it did when I lived here all those years ago. Years I don't want to remember but need to revisit.

"We don't have much time, Viper," Breaker says, as he slides in beside me, keeping up with my determined pace. "Fallon and Hunter are expecting us in Inverness soon, and the trip is—"

"No shit," I snap, then grind my jaw. I don't have to see his face to know I've hurt his feelings. Again. But fuck. I'm sick of tiptoeing around them. Around my own.

"If you prefer to do this alone, we can go back to the car," Striker says. "You don't have to be an asshole."

I huff out a laugh, because we all know I'm an asshole, and turn around, facing Striker. Behind him the path winds down to where our rental car sits at an angle on the side of the dirt road. The long, windy drive to the hilltop was blocked off years ago, so we were forced to go on foot up this steep path to the entrance.

He quirks a brow. Shoving a tendril of hair away from my face, I ignore all the silent questions hanging in the air, and shift my focus to the

lush green landscape, dotted with lavender. I take in the scenery, my heart expanding at the raw beauty.

It's just as I remember it. The low mountain range in the distance, the lake at the foothills reflecting the gray sky, and bloated clouds. The landscape is so dramatically rugged and wild. Scraped of human life except for the small village resting in the middle. It's so tragically beautiful, you'd never know hope gets eaten in this desolate place.

Fallon rescued me from this hell shrouded in prayers and I never wanted to return. Yet here I am, seeking something I can't even name.

Breaker nudges my elbow, bringing me out of my thoughts. I glance his way, catching his eyes, but look away.

He yearns too.

"Come on," I say, continuing up the path and shoving away guilt, but it tugs at the skin on my back like an old scar.

I'm being a dick, I know, but they have no clue what this place was. Or maybe they do, and that's why they hover like mother hens.

Ever since the day we found those papers in Fallon's office, the memories of my time here have refused to leave. They claw inside my head, making me antsy. I had thought I had buried them so deep, memories would never visit again, but now that they have awoken, they haunt me.

Like the day Fallon came for me, carrying a kind smile and eyes resembling all the good things from my past.

Like her.

"Hey." Breaker grips my shoulder, forcing my focus on him.

Again.

When our eyes connect, that familiar heat zaps down my spine. His winter-blue eyes move over my face, assessing. Seeing. They're like Fallon's. Eerily so. But unlike Fallon, he's so good. Breaker radiates purity and warmth. Like home and everything safe, and I can't even look at him. Not after that night five months ago. When I stole a piece of his innocence in that shitty hotel.

Or maybe he took the last dregs of mine.

But I know that's not true. Cruel hands slashed away my innocence while I kneeled in a dark room with rose-scented candles and whispered sins.

Breaker gave his innocence away. He exchanged it for a single night of meaningless sex with a complete fucking stranger. I don't know which

part pisses me off more. That he gave his virginity to a random woman he picked up in a bar between missions—a woman who didn't give a shit about him—or that he chose to sleep with someone two days after that night in the hotel when I let him strip me of all my barriers.

"We don't have to be here." Breaker gestures to the hilltop, eyeing me strangely. Part of me wonders if he knows the secrets I keep. He lifts his chin toward the path ahead. "Whatever is up there can stay in the past."

"The woman in the village said the place isn't even here anymore," Striker adds, catching up with us. He looks around, then to the copse of trees, before his gold eyes land on me. "We can go back."

"I have to see it," I say.

What I don't tell him is I need to see, to know it's gone, so I can bury the past. Leave behind the corrosive thoughts in this God-forsaken place and be done with them. And maybe, just maybe, I can fucking breathe. Live. Be at peace.

Without explaining further, I continue on, my gut churning, knowing that we should be able to spot the tops of the towers above the tree line, but it's just more sky and gray clouds.

The woman in the tavern we stopped at told us the old school was in ruins, which seems impossible. It was such a massive structure, with tall stone walls and angled roofs that covered the sins that lived within its dark halls. Stained glass windows depicting saints and fallen angels. Cold drafts in secret rooms filled with punishing pain. All this for a God who felt too distant to care about a boy in an orphanage.

There is no way it's just gone.

It takes us another minute to reach the top, but when we do, we freeze, taking in the scene.

"Jesus," Striker whispers. He steps off the path, inching forward, hands the pockets of his jeans. "What do you think happened?"

Destruction. Damnation.

A cleansing.

"What was this place?" Breaker asks. "It looks like…" He doesn't continue. We know what it looks like.

"Saint Theresa School for Boys," I say, my heart doing a weird tumble in my chest. "This is where Fallon found me."

Striker glances over his shoulder at me, then down to the ground. Large stones scatter the landscape, stuck at odd angles in the damp emerald

grass. Only a few walls remain upright, all scorched with long black lines that snake up toward the sky. The large opening in the cathedral wall that held stained glass, now gapes empty and vacant.

"Looks like the place burned to the ground," he says. "How long ago did she say this place—"

"Eighteen years ago," I say, cutting him off.

"So you'd have been, what?" Breaker asks. "Seven?"

I nod absently, taking a step forward, careful not to step on the thick black stones embedded in the ground.

"It must have been one hell of a fire," Breaker says. "This place looks like a fucking bomb went off."

Striker kicks at a large stone, covered in moss. "Didn't you mention Fallon brought you to the school when you were six?"

My heart hammers, that old fear digging into the back of my neck like talons. I don't answer as I move ahead, mindful of each step. He knows the answer. It was in the file.

"Excuse me!" Behind us, a voice carries over the ruins, and we turn to find a man somewhere in his forties rushing up the path, waving at us.

"Who the fuck is that?" Striker asks as Breaker stalks forward to meet the man halfway.

His shaggy red hair frames a handsome but open face, covered in freckles. A woven brown sweater covers his broad chest, and worn jeans stretch over his thick legs. He has a stocky, hardworking look to him, like everyone else who lives here. When he reaches Breaker, he pulls out a piece of paper about the size of a photograph and hands it to him.

"My mum thought you'd want this," he says with a thick accent, eyeing me as Breaker inspects the paper. "She told me to come up here and make sure you got the picture."

"Your mother is the woman from the tavern?" I ask.

"Aye," he says. "Mum told me to get up here and give ya that photo. Said you may want it."

I glance at Breaker, but he's absorbed in the photograph, his focus making me uneasy.

"You were here, weren't you?" the man asks me. "At the boys' home?"

When I nod, he makes a sound in his throat, then shifts his attention to the ruins at my back.

“It was a good thing you got adopted,” he says. “Though none of the boys were here when it happened.”

“What happened?” Striker asks. “Fire?”

“Aye, if you wanna call it that.” The man gestures behind me, making the skin on my back prick. “It was more like hell itself had opened, and the Devil swallowed the whole place. You could see the flames for miles, and it burned for days on end.”

Turning, I take in the sight, my hands tingling with the memories. Hours spent kneeling, asking for forgiveness, begging Headmistress Isla to help me cleanse my soul. To this day, I’m not sure what I was supposed to be repenting for. Being a boy with no parents, perhaps.

“I was a teen when it happened. Maddest thing,” he goes on. “God’s perfect timing, my mum said. Two women from the Society for Boys and Girls phoned up about a week before, sayin’ the Society was takin’ the kids on a wee trip. Somethin’ about socializing. I mind readin’ in the paper that if they’d not left for the Spring Festival in Inverness, they’d all’ve been dead.”

“The sisters took them?” I don’t look his way, already knowing what he’s going to say.

“Naw. The two from the Society. They got the lads gathered up and took the whole lot. There weren’t many boys left at the school then. I mind it, ’cause we saw a few of them passin’ through the town, bein’ taken to different homes—maybe even to new families. It all happened that quick. Just a few weeks, if I’m mindin’ right. But who kens? Whatever was going on up at that school, it was kept quiet.”

A soft, humorless chuckle leaves me.

“Anyway, if it hadn’t been for that trip, the lads would've been trapped in there as well, and gone up in flames like the sisters,” he says. “Awful thing, that.”

I step forward, where the entrance had been, placing a boot on the first step that now leads to nothing. Only blackened stone pillars remain where the old wooden doors once hung.

“You said they all died?” I ask.

“Aye.” He crosses his arms, lifting his chin toward the ruins. “They found the sisters in that big room at the back o’ the school.”

I blink, refusing to let the images of the past take hold. Unease eats at my stomach, knowing exactly which room he means.

“Folk in the town were sayin’ they found the bodies of the nuns huddled in the corner. The fire marshal said the door must’ve got stuck, or maybe the roof came down, trappin’ them inside.”

“That’s awful,” Striker says.

“Aye, burned the lot o’ them alive. The fire was so hot, folk said some of the nuns’ bones melted to the floor like plastic. The inspectors reckoned some kind of accelerant was used. Looked like a pro job, they said. Never did find out who did it or why. Heard they had to use dental records to tell who was who.”

“Sister Isla?” I ask.

He makes a sound, like he’s thinking, but I don’t turn around. “Aye, I reckon that was the headmistress back then. She was the one lyin’ on the altar. Burned that bad they had to take the whole mess to the morgue. Couldn’t even pry what was left of the bones off the stone.”

I sense more than see Breaker come to stand next to me. My focus drops to the photograph in his outstretched hand. When my gaze lands on the image, my eyes dart to his.

He quirks an eyebrow in question. “Is that who I think it is?”

I take the photograph, examining each face. The picture is grainy, the colors faded, but the color of her eyes is the same. Clear blue. Like glass.

Like home.

My chest constricts, and I close my eyes. A hand lands on my shoulder, and I open them to see Striker looking down at the image with an odd expression on his face.

Behind us, the man’s cough snaps me out of the fog. I turn around to face him, holding up the image he brought.

“How did you get this?” I ask him. “You said your mother had it?”

“Aye,” he says. “She said one of the Society lasses brought it to her on the way out of town that day of the festival. I mind seein’ her. She was bonnie. Right graceful. Mum said she gave it to her and told her to keep it. Said one day, someone might come lookin’ for it.”

My jaw clenches, and I glance back down at the image, an odd sensation in my gut.

“Don’t stay in this place too long,” the man says, waving as he turns away. “Devil might bind to ya.”

Striker says something to him, but I’m not paying attention, I’m so focused on the picture. Every memory I tucked away, rattles and shakes in

my head.

"Hey," Breaker says, nudging me with his elbow. "Are you okay?"

"Do you think he loves us?" I ask. "Father?"

Striker chuckles. "If he does, he has a strange way of showing it."

I glance back at the ruins. I swear the wind still carried their screams. I can imagine them trapped. Terrified. On their knees, praying for mercy, begging to be saved.

And none of their prayers were answered.

Just like mine never were.

"Do you remember her?" Breaker asks, tapping the image of the tall, thin woman holding a baby with bright red hair. "That's your mother, right?"

I nod, examining her face.

"How come you never told us?" Breaker asks, a slight accusation staining his tone. Like he's hurt I didn't confide in him.

But what was I supposed to tell a boy who had no mother, or good memories, and had lived through the same hell in that cold school that I had? Breaker was born from hate and death, and I was born to a mother who loved me but who was taken too early.

"She's pretty," Striker says, looking over my shoulder. "She looks young, though."

"She was," I run my finger over the image, tracing the shape of her face before tucking it into my back pocket and heading back down the path.

"Hey, Viper," Breaker calls. I pause, shifting to look at him. "Do you remember her?"

Part of me wants to lie. Tell him I have no memory of the young woman who gave birth to me. But I don't think I could shatter the hope on his face that at least one of us had something good before the school.

"Yes." I nod. "I remember watching her dance. I remember walking across the stage, following her as she practiced. Her whispering that she loved me."

Striker comes close, that strange expression I saw earlier returning. "So you remember that your mother was a ballerina?"

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Chapter 2

Delilah

PAIN. IT'S EVERYWHERE. IT'S all I am.

Every inhale sends lightning through my ribs. My back throbs in rhythm with my pulse, each heartbeat sending fresh waves of fire across my skin. But the pain surging through my body isn't nearly as consuming as the agony shredding my heart.

Outside, the faint, slick sound of a van door sliding closed, then another, breaks the quiet room. Then it's just my heavy gasps as I try to regain control, each breath loud in the thick silence.

I curl my fingers against the floor, anchoring myself, but all I see is the gun pressed against Striker's temple, Reaper kneeling. Both helpless. Defeated.

I twist my head to press my cheek to the cold floor in a desperate attempt to focus, and squeeze my eyes shut, sucking in a shaky breath, slowly easing air into my lungs. A tug of pain, like a dull blade in my ribs, makes me gasp. I exhale slowly. Fire rakes across my back. I freeze, half-curled on the floor, afraid to move again.

Fingers delicately touch my shoulder. "Princess," Striker whispers.

When I don't move or speak, or even open my eyes, he says my name again, his voice just a trembling breath and paper-thin. Like he's terrified I'll shatter.

Maybe I will.

I’m barely held together. Just threads of pain, stitched together with a fear that’s quickly melting at the seams as fiery rage scalds my bloodstream.

Striker gently swipes at the hair in my face, tucking strands behind my ear. “Delilah.” His voice changes. Cracks a little.

Fallon’s words flash through my head.

All I have to do is give the order.

Your favorite brother.

I knew you didn’t want another death on your hands.

My jaw clenches. Pain fades behind a wall of fury. I shift, opening my eyes, and my gaze lands on his strong, solid form. Reaper’s black eyes lock with mine, but he doesn’t move from where he’s still kneeling a few feet away. He’s not moved an inch since Fallon and his soldiers filed from the room. Fleetingly, I wonder if he’s frozen by rage like me.

I keep my eyes on Reaper as I suck in slow, steady breaths, pulling the emotions whirling through me back to center.

If you touch her again, I’ll gut you.

He threatened to gut, to hurt, his father, the man who has a dangerous leash on these men. And he did it for me. To keep me from being harmed.

Another sob threatens to escape at the realization, but I hold it in, biting my lip as I attempt to sit. Pain twists in my side, and I press my palm to my ribs.

Reaper’s gaze shifts to Striker beside me.

Striker grips my shoulder to steady me. “Hold on. Don’t move yet.” His large hand presses against my side gently. Testing. Checking. “It doesn’t feel like anything is broken,” he says, but I know he’s talking to Reaper. “Just bruised.”

My ruined dress falls open, revealing my bra as he examines my back, and a rumbling curse leaves him, dark and deadly. He doesn’t need to say out loud that I’m going to bruise. I feel it.

He swipes the hair away from my face, and his gold eyes and skull mask come into view. His hand trembles, then balls into a fist as he pulls it away and presses it to his thigh.

The storm raging in my chest grows, stretches and builds into something monstrous, something dark and full of hate, until I’m shaking from it too.

Striker shifts, pulling me into his arms, burying his face in my hair. Inhaling deeply as if he can capture the essence of me into his lungs. Like

that alone will keep me safe.

But who keeps him safe?

With my gaze locked on Reaper, I tuck myself into Striker's chest, breathing in his clean scent, now tinged with something sharper, and let him hold me. The phantom click of a gun cocking against his temple echoes in my ears, and the anger inside spikes. Screams until I hear myself saying, "Does he always do that?"

Reaper's eyes burn into me, but he remains unmoving. I wonder if he's even seeing me anymore. If maybe his mind is consumed by the image of that gun at Striker's head too.

When neither man answers, I pull away to look at Striker. "Your father," I continue. "Does he always pop in unannounced and threaten to kill someone?"

Striker's brows move under his mask like he's frowning. I grip the bottom and pull it over his head. His hair sticks up at odd angles, and I smooth the strands down with trembling fingers. Touching his face, his lips as gently as he's touching me. Needing him to be okay.

Because what if he wasn't? What if I had said the wrong thing? What if Fallon had ordered that soldier to kill his son?

Your favorite brother.

I focus on Reaper. He hasn't moved an inch.

"I'll take your lack of response as confirmation that your father is just as insane as mine," I say. "One thing we have in common, it seems."

When I push myself up, Reaper lunges forward, gripping my arms as Striker rises beside me.

"Shit," I hiss as the skin pulls across my back.

Okay, maybe not just bruised.

"Turn around," Reaper says, voice low, almost unrecognizable. "Let me see."

"I'm fine," I lie, my hand flying to my ribs as pain stabs through them. We all know I'm anything but fine.

He turns me to face Striker, who's so focused on Reaper's masked face, I'm glad he can't see me flinch when Reaper's fingers graze over my back.

"Go put ice on these," Reaper says, his voice hard, verging on callous. So unlike the man who threatened to gut his father only moments

ago. So unlike the man who kissed me in a brightly lit room while my entire world was in darkness.

My stomach sinks as the coldness of his words slips under my skin. Push, pull. Softness, then brutal slices of his hard edges. That's all I get from him. Reminding myself to accept this doesn't help the ache that spreads through me.

"I'm fine," I say again, matching his tone as I turn to face him, but Striker's already steering me toward the door. I try to jerk out of his grasp, but he stops, giving me a look that would have me shrinking back before. Before I knew him.

"Is that how he controls you?" The words taste bitter on my tongue. "By threatening to kill one of you if you step out of line?"

The muscles in Striker's jaw jump. "They aren't threats, Princess."

A riot of emotions burst through me, making my heart tumble in my chest. Striker must see each one as they thrash their way through my heart because his features soften.

"Come on," he says, reaching for my hand.

I wrench away, my fingers curling into fists. "That's it?" The words scrape my throat. "He shows up, lashes us, threatens to kill us, and we just —what? Walk away?" My voice cracks, breaks. "We do nothing?"

"You do as we say," Striker snaps, grabbing my forearm. His eyes flick to Reaper. "We will take care of Fallon."

"Take care?" The words explode from me. "How?" I whirl toward Reaper. "Stop leaving me in the dark. You want me to follow your every command, but I know nothing."

Reaper's voice turns to ice. "You know everything you need to know." He jabs a finger toward the doorway. "Now go."

"Tell me." Tears burn my eyes, a shudder wracking my shoulders.

In three strides, he's before me, pulling me toward him. His fingers thread through my hair while his other hand traces my neck, cupping my jaw. I clutch at his shirt, bunching the sweat-dampened fabric between my fingers. His heartbeat hammers against my palm, beating hard. Alive.

His obsidian eyes scan my face, tanned flesh creasing at the corners. The dark and tired look swirling behind them makes my chest ache. I think this may be the first time it registers he's truly just a man under that mask. He's larger than life and holds such a power over me that I've built him up to some superhuman force. But he's just human and just as breakable as me.

“Help me understand,” I whisper, searching his eyes, but they flicker away and he lets me go. “I need to understand why.”

I don’t understand. I can’t comprehend why they take orders from him. Why they are loyal. Why they are here and allowing all of this. They can stop at any time and refuse to follow any more of his commands.

But maybe they can’t. I’ve felt what it’s like to be controlled by a man who holds too much power. Rune kept me under his thumb my entire life.

They tried to keep Cora, but Fallon brought backup, overpowering them with ease. It is possible they all feel as trapped as I do. Trapped in their anger toward Rune and the need for revenge. Stuck with Fallon and stuck in the bitterness of vengeance.

“You won’t understand.” Striker’s voice snaps me out of my spiraling thoughts. His chest rises and falls as he stalks toward me, then cups my face in his hands. The slight tremble is still there. Fear. It’s still eating him from the inside out. “And we’re not digging into all that right now.”

“Would he have done it?” I ask, and the question hangs in the air, making the air thick.

“Yes.” Reaper’s response cuts sharply through me. Cold. Final.

Striker’s eyes fall closed as he leans down, pressing his forehead to mine. Like the truth is too heavy to bear. “Yes,” he whispers. “He would have done it just to hurt them.”

Them. Viper. Breaker.

Reaper.

Your favorite brother.

Striker backs away and pulls me toward the door. The movement reminds me that my body is just as bruised as my heart, so I let him guide me forward. I glance over my shoulder when we reach the hall. Reaper stands in the center of the room, eyes following me as Striker tugs me away and down the hall, and that dark feeling inside me grows even heavier. Angrier.

Fallon would have killed his own son to keep control over them.

My stomach churns with acid as the truth burns through me.

He uses fear to control them. And it’s the type of fear that makes people do terrible things. The type of fear that would make a young girl remain silent after the man who raised her turned on her. This is the fear

that keeps strong men under the thumb of a man who, I think, may be just as evil as Rune.

Maybe even worse.

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Chapter 3

Cora

SELF-PITY DOESN'T FIT ME. It's an ill-fitting suit, wrapping around me too tightly. It always feels unwarranted because I am, after all, the cause of my demise. I helped create the rules and never told a soul. I'm the master of my fate as was the one who decided to manipulate Rune's hatred, trying to shape him by being compliant.

But when you try to force affection by being at their service—behaving sweetly, more compliant, more usable and abusable—love never blooms. Something else forms. A dark, twisted power imbalance, and they just take and take and take until there's nothing left.

But Rune hasn't taken every ounce of me yet.

I refuse to let him.

I prop myself up in bed and gaze around Breaker's room, taking in the tidy space. It's just like him. So neat and orderly. I want to sink back into the scent of him, his warm covers, and soft pillows, but I can't sleep.

I'm too full. Too empty.

Too fucking done.

I've spent the last hour turning the entire situation over and over in my head and deep in my gut I know what I have to do.

God, he's going to be pissed. They both are.

But there are no other options.

Just the thought of my plan sends an oily sensation through me. I rake my nails down my arms, trying to rid myself of Rune's lingering touch,

but it’s a stain I’ll never fully scrub away. As much as I want to hide here forever, I have to move forward and attempt to reduce the casualties Rune leaves in his wake. Clyde saw what happened. If Rune finds out Clyde now knows what he did to me, it will put a target on Clyde’s back, and I’ll lose the only man who’s ever really loved me the way a father should. Completely. Without question. Without strings.

Reaper’s face flashes in my mind.

I need you to trust me.

Reaper sent me back because he had no choice. I know how it feels to be so trapped, so not in control of your own destiny, that when he asked me to trust him, to wait, to be what he needed. While I don’t know what they have planned for Delly, I do know what Reaper needs me to do.

So I will be what he needs.

His eyes and ears.

My mind made up, I toss back the blankets and stand on shaky legs. Nausea rolls through my stomach as I touch my forehead, then my cheek, finding tender spots where I know bruises will bloom. Still in my jeans and t-shirt from earlier, I ignore the crawling under my skin and scan the room, spotting my shoes and wristlet by the door. I rush for them and slide my shoes on, then dig out my phone and stuff my ID and a few credit cards into my bra. The less I have to carry, the better.

My phone is off, and I almost power it on, but Clyde’s warning about Rune tracking me flashes through my mind. I keep it turned off and shove it in my back pocket. I don’t know how any of that works, but if Clyde turned it off, then that must mean Rune can only see my location when it’s on.

At the door, I press my ear against it, listening. When I hear nothing I open it a crack, half-expecting Breaker to be guarding the door, but the hallway is empty. I slip out, then tiptoe down the catwalk. Below, the first floor sits dark and vacant, the only light the Christmas lights wrapped around the support poles.

When I hear muffled voices drifting down from above, I glance up to the top floor where they keep the surveillance equipment. Clyde and Breaker must be up there talking, which works well for me. They’re probably watching Rune on all those cameras.

Cameras that they have set up at Rune’s and my condo.

I’ll deal with that when the time comes.

Pulse racing, I inch down the stairs and stop on the bottom step. When no one appears, I rush toward the factory's front door, then stop. I need time. More time than I have. With a quick glance back up to the third floor, I backtrack and sneak into the bathroom where Breaker and I bathed yesterday.

God, was all this really just a day ago?

I bolt to the first stall and turn the knob. Water explodes from the pipes with a metallic groan. My heart slams into my chest, and I dart to the door, opening it just enough to make sure neither of them came downstairs, drawn by the noise.

Hopefully the shower will buy me some time.

Waiting a heartbeat, I ease the bathroom door closed, and creep to the metal exit door, eyes fixed on the top floor stairwell, bracing for Breaker or Clyde to appear. Before I can second-guess my decision, I unlock the latch, and ease the door open, stepping out into the cool night air. Several large floodlights illuminate the empty parking lot around the building. Beyond that, it's just shadowy night.

The level of surveillance I saw upstairs tells me this place must have cameras so I scan the lot and building. Spotting none, I hug the wall as I make my way toward the front of the factory, and peer around the corner. Clyde's SUV sits by the bay door, and I debate checking it for keys, but realize I don't have the code to open the gate.

I'll have to find another way out.

I look for cameras one more time, then dart toward the back of the lot, giving a wide berth to what looks like a garage with twin roll-up doors. Sodium-colored floodlights cast everything around the building in a ghoulish white, illuminating walls covered in sprawling graffiti tags.

I pause, breathing hard. The graffiti means there's a way in.

And out.

Relief floods me until I spot the razor wire glinting along the fence top. Whoever tagged these walls didn't climb over that. They either found a break in the fence or made one.

I sprint across the parking lot, skidding to a stop at the back fence. Pain explodes behind my eyes. The world tilts. I clutch the metal links, swaying as fear, adrenaline, and dizziness swirl through me. When the pain subsides, I scan the shadows, hoping I'm hidden.

Hope.

A fool’s wish.

Once my eyes adjust to the darkness, I glance over my shoulder at the factory, my heart sinking.

I have to do this. There is no other way.

Besides, he’s expecting me.

Dragging my hand along the cool metal links, I walk the fence line, searching for a break in the links. Just as I’m ready to give up and find another way out, or go back and reason with Clyde, I spot a section where someone’s cut just enough chain link to curl upward, leaving a gap just big enough for a small body.

Small like me.

I drop to my knees, ignoring the pain blaring in my head and the dull ache between my legs, and push the fencing outward.

I may fit.

I have to.

Loose asphalt scrapes my palms as I lower to my belly and slowly shimmy through the opening. My shirt snags on a jagged piece of fencing.

“Fuck,” I hiss, twisting to free myself. I push through as my hair snags, then my jeans. Biting my lip against frustrated tears, I force my hips through the opening. Chain links rattle as I pop free, scrambling to my feet on the other side.

Clyde’s going to strangle me.

God knows what Breaker is going to do.

Nothing, Cora. They can’t do a damn thing, which is why it’s up to you.

And I need to hurry.

With one last glance over my shoulder, I sprint the empty lot beside theirs until I hit the sidewalk. I double over, hands on knees, gulping air. Pain spikes through my temples, and I stand upright, pressing my fingers against the dull throb as I scan the shadow-draped street. At this hour, I’m hoping that anyone with nefarious intent is home sleeping, and not out looking for someone to kidnap.

I’ve already been through that and I doubt I’d be so lucky a second time.

Inhaling, I square my shoulders, trying to untangle the knot in my chest, and head away from the men’s compound, past deserted stores and vacant lots. Overhead, the streetlights buzz and pop, like those bug zappers

people use when they're camping, blasting every inch of pavement with harsh white, leaving me exposed. I quicken my pace, throwing glances over my shoulder until the factory disappears behind me.

I relax, but then a voice rasps from the darkness beside a boarded-up convenience store and my pulse explodes.

Fuck. I really don't feel like being murdered right now.

"Hey," the voice says again. "Got some change?"

The shadows shift, and an old woman emerges into the harsh streetlight, a ratty flannel draped over her bony shoulders.

"Nope," I say, picking up my pace into a jog.

"Fuck you too," she spits as I hurry past.

When she takes off in the opposite direction, my shoulders drop and I slow down, focusing on the distant row of lights. I remember seeing a gas station next to the shopping complex when Breaker drove me here. Hopefully it's open 24 hours.

Me and that damn hope again. But the faster I'm out of here, the less likely I'll be caught.

When I round the corner, I spot the shopping complex. All the stores are dark, but the gas station on the corner is open. I look both ways before crossing the street, even though there is no one around except for a suspicious bundle of blankets nestled beside the large Dollar General.

The bell jingles as I shove the convenience store door open. Cold air blasts my face, along with the scent of stale coffee and chemical floral deodorizer strong enough to make me wince. The girl behind the counter looks my way, her gaze snagging on me for a few seconds before she goes back to her phone.

I hurry to the counter, my heart jack hammering, my palms landing on the scratched glass.

"Hey," I say to the girl. She's around my age, eyes smeared with black eyeliner, her brow and nose holding several piercings. She levels me with a look that tells me whatever reason I have for bothering her better be good.

"Yeah?" she asks, eyes moving from my face to my hands resting on the countertop. She shoves her phone in her back pocket as she eyes me. Her brows knit a little, and panic sweeps through me.

I catch my reflection in the sunglasses rack mirror and grimace. There's a small lump on my forehead and a faint bruise on my cheek. My

eyes look haunted, wild and desperate.

But then again, I am.

“What do you need?” she asks.

“Can I use your phone?” I meet her eyes again. “To call a taxi? My phone died, so I can’t order a ride.”

Her face pinches but she pulls her phone out and taps the screen. My heart slams against my ribs, the absurd fear that she knows who I am, or that she’s calling the police, creates an urge to dash for the door as she lifts it to her ear.

A second later she says, “Yeah, I need a taxi at—” she rattles off the address of our location, eyes never leaving mine, then says, “Where to?”

I give her the address of the intersection near my condo. Her brows raise but she repeats it, then hangs up.

“Thanks,” I say, backing away. “I’ll wait outside.”

“You got cash?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“Watch your card then, because they’ll tack on extra fees if they don’t steal your info.” She eyes my forehead as she shoves the phone back into her pocket, then gestures to my face. “Bad boys aren’t worth it. They start out sexy and thrilling, then do that.”

I touch the tender lump, wincing. If she only knew.

I nod and shove the door open with more force than necessary and step outside. The glow of downtown in the distance blocks out the stars, making me wish I was back at the men’s estate watching the night sky over the ocean with Delly.

Delly. I miss her so much. I wonder if she’s watching the sky from our room, missing me as much as I miss her. Wishing she were here.

If only here, this place, wasn’t such hell. And if only not returning to Rune was an option. Clyde is in danger. It doesn’t matter that they’ve been friends for years. Rune would remove him just like he removed my mother because Rune Gavin will not be stopped.

Men like him never are.

There’s only one place I can go.

The one place where he knows I’ll go crawling back, because I always do.

The one place Reaper said he needed me.

On the inside.

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Chapter 9

Breaker

ANGER RUNS IN HOT waves under my skin. A tightness winds around my ribcage, threatening to suffocate me. It's crushing. This heaviness of knowing the reason Cora was hurt was because of me. If I had just controlled myself, not acted on impulse, Rune wouldn't have laid a hand on her.

I raise my eyes to the bathroom door where she's hiding, then drop to my large shirt and boxers I have next to me, ready for her when she decides to come out.

I just want to get her into bed. Care for her. Keep her safe.

"You realize this is your fault," Harlow says, like the guilt hanging over me is thick enough to see.

"Roughly ninety-nine percent," I agree, "but I'm not shouldering blame that isn't mine." My pointed look turns his features hard. "You're a part of this too."

My words piss him off even more, and he spins away, raking a hand over his short-graying hair, to stare at the closed bathroom door. Guess he knows by forcing her to return to Rune, not fucking saying or doing anything to stop Rune from handing Cora over to Zane, makes him just as guilty as the rest of us.

We've all sacrificed her safety for this mission. We're all to blame.

"I need to talk to him," Clyde says, resuming his pacing. He can't seem to sit still. Moving from the couch next to me to pacing the length of

the room as he mutters then says, “But I don’t know if I can after what he did.”

My chest squeezes. Just the thought of her being hurt gives me that tight sensation zapping through me, and I grip my thighs, counting breaths, forcing oxygen past the knot. The beast inside me rattles its cage, hungry for blood. Rune’s blood. If I give in to what it wants, I’ll be satisfied, but we’ll never get what we need. What Reaper needs from this mission.

The clack clack clack of Clyde’s shoes on the concrete floor matches in time with my finger tapping my thigh. When I realize I’m doing it, I curl my fingers into a fist, feeling the control I have over that monstrous thing lining my insides slipping away.

I unclench my jaw and exhale slowly. “We all have to face Rune soon.”

“Don’t fucking remind me,” Harlow mutters and resumes his pacing. “He still hasn’t contacted me. He just fucking left her there, like…” His voice trails off. There’s no need to say it.

Considering the frantic state Harlow was in when he returned with her, I can only imagine the condition he found Cora in when he went to get her from her condo. I keep seeing her, the purple-black bruise spreading beneath her right eye, the lump on her forehead. My stomach lurches every time I think of Rune harming her.

I never checked his location until it was too late. That knowledge is going to sit with me for the rest of my life, tucked away with all the other horrible things I’ve seen and done.

Our Little Red was being brutally assaulted, yet again, by her abuser while I sat here drinking and feeling smug. The tortured look on Harlow’s face when he carried her into the factory has me terrified she’s lying about the extent of Rune’s assault. I’m not sure I can handle the reality. How she’s survived him is beyond me.

The scrape of Clyde’s shoes against the concrete floor drags my focus back to him, and the look he gives me could cut glass. His jaw works, and a vein pulses at his temple. The anguish he’s dragged around for hours has turned into rage, and it’s pointed at me.

I deserve it.

I failed. It was my job to keep her safe, and I fucking failed.

After a moment, he peels his gaze from me, and continues pacing. I eye the vodka bottle still sitting on the coffee table in front of me, wishing I

could drown myself in it. But it won't do anyone any good. Cora, least of all.

I need to focus. Come up with a plan. Sitting here wallowing in guilt will accomplish nothing. Staring at the monitors upstairs does me no good either, even though I want to track Rune's every move. We wasted precious time monitoring him after I tucked Cora into bed, watching him move from his club to his house, then back again.

Tracking him tells us nothing. Sitting here waiting for Cora to get out of the shower is a waste of time, but I refuse to disturb her, despite Clyde's insistence that I check on her. She needs space. To be alone and process what she's endured. Even though every atom in my being screams to stay close to her, she needs a minute.

"Is she still in the shower?" I ask, eyeing the door Harlow's hovering near.

"If you mean is the shower still running, then yes," Harlow snaps. "But I don't have eyes on her, so I don't know." He points at the door. "You need to go in there with her before I do. And I know for a fact, my being in there would only upset her more."

I shake my head, staring down at my phone, resting face down on the coffee table, wishing for a message from Reap or Strike, or any sign to tell me what I should do next. As much as I want to grab it and check for a message or Rune's movement, I don't pick it up.

It's a waste of time.

"She has a fucking head injury," Harlow says. I don't even have to look at him to feel the hole he's boring into my skull with his blame. "What if she gets dizzy and falls?"

"If she needs help, she will call for us," I say, even though that is the exact reason I want to be in there with her. But I force myself to remain still. I may not know the violating touch of hands that are supposed to protect, but I know what it feels like to need to cleanse yourself of vile things.

My phone vibrates with yet another incoming alert, and I cave, snatching it up from the coffee table. The camera set up outside Rune's house shows a live feed of Rune's car pulling into his long driveway, the iron gates sliding closed behind his black SUV.

Gnashing my teeth, I toss the phone down. It skitters across the table with a harsh clatter. My temples throb as I reach for the remote instead, that

tightness returning to my chest. He's just going home. Going about his business as if nothing happened.

The phone buzzes again with another alert, but I leave it face-down. If I obsess over every single movement, I'm going to go mad.

Hell, sitting here waiting, and I'm already halfway there. My eyes drift to the thin line of light beneath the bathroom door.

She's okay. Just breathe. The vise around my ribcage loosens a fraction, knowing she's with me, and away from Rune.

"This doesn't wreck the mission," Harlow says suddenly. I glance his way to find him watching me.

"Correct." I nod. "Everything is still on track. We just have to wait for Delilah."

I'm about to say that with Zane out of commission, it gives Delilah a little more time to prepare, but swallow it back, knowing the reminder of what I did to Zane will just enrage Harlow further.

"Any updates?" His eyes flick to my phone. "Has Reaper contacted you?"

"No," I say. If he's asking, then that means Reaper hasn't given him an update either. "We've been keeping communication at a minimum."

"Good. No reason for unnecessary risks."

We've spent so long planning this, have invested so many years, spent so much energy, I fear constantly we've become complacent. It's been fairly easy to set this up, as well as for Harlow to keep under Rune's radar, that sometimes it all just feels a little too easy. Then again, Rune's arrogance helps. He must think it impossible that Harlow would ever betray him, considering he knows about his hunts.

Hell, Harlow was there to see the aftermath of the first one.

So was Viper, though he never talks about it.

None of us talks about those days in the wilderness. Some things are better left in the past.

"Shit," Harlow mutters. I glance his way. He rubs his jaw, then crosses his arms. When he sees my expression, he continues, "What if Rune thinks Cora returned to my house?"

"Do you really think he's concerned?" I ask. "How long has he gotten away with hurting her, and no one knew?"

Harlow's jaw pops. He looks up at the ceiling, blowing out a heavy breath. I almost feel bad for him, but fuck, he has turned a blind eye to so

much that I think he's just as guilty as me.

"I don't want her near him," he says. "But I don't know how to keep her away from him."

"Maybe we can use Zane's injury to our advantage," I say.

"Injury?" Harlow scoffs, brows lifting. "We're not calling it what it is, Breaker?"

"Fine. We can use how I tortured Zane to our advantage."

Harlow narrows his eyes at me. "Go on."

"You mentioned he thinks it was one of us who fucked up Zane," I say. "Maybe we can use this to keep Cora away from Rune for a while."

Harlow nods. "Rune believes one of you attacked Zane in retaliation for forcing Fallon's hand. Rune knew Cora would be returned. And we all know he's waiting for Fallon to contact him again about Delilah."

"We can feed his paranoia. Tell him after Zane's attack, she's safer with you since"—I gesture to him—"you live in a fortress."

Harlow smirks, obviously liking this idea. "I keep her at my house, using Fallon as an excuse to keep her with me at all times."

"Then he won't see the extent…" I let the rest of the sentence hang in the air unspoken. Then Rune won't see the extent of the damage he caused. My chest squeezes, and I have to take in a breath to ease it.

Harlow takes a deep breath too, then says, "If I keep her with me, I can keep her in training. She's an excellent shot."

I lean back in my seat, trying to picture her holding an AR-15. Harlow says she's quick and highly skilled. Our tiny Little Red. I wish I could see her with a weapon. One pointed at Rune's head. We've sought revenge for what he did to Hunter, but I think Cora deserves to be the one who ends him.

He destroyed Hunter over weeks, but he tore Cora apart piece by piece for years.

The phone vibrates again, but I ignore it. Obsessively watching Rune's front gate will change nothing.

"I should probably get her back to my place," Clyde says. "I'll keep her phone off until morning and let Rune think she spent the night at her condo." He gestures to the bathroom door. "Go get her."

I set the remote down and stalk across the room, easing the door open. Steam sticks to my skin the second I walk in, the warm air coating my

lungs as I inhale. The row of showers to the right is empty, even though the first showerhead blasts water onto the white tile floor.

Unease curls around my throat, making it hard to swallow. Glancing around, I stalk to the toilets, pushing open each stall door, the metal doors clanging loudly, until I've checked them all. Fear weaves up my spine as I turn, scanning the space, not seeing her anywhere.

It's not like she can hide in a bathroom.

"Harlow," I choke out, my voice cracking.

He bursts through the door, eyes widening as his gaze sweeps the empty stalls, the abandoned shower. His shoulders drop. "Goddammit, she didn't," he growls. "I'm going to strangle her."

I close the distance between us, gripping his collar, my voice coming out hard and rough. "Where the fuck did she go, Harlow?"

He shoves me away. "You know where she is."

My heartbeat hammers so hard, I press my palm to my chest like this will slow it down. The room blurs at the edges, my head swirling with panic and terrible building rage.

This isn't the first time she's dealt with Rune. Men like him, like Fallon, have patterns. I know this. Hell, we all do.

They lash out and then regain your loyalty with praises and a few kind words. Days, sometimes even weeks, of peace and affection, and right when you almost believe they might have truly changed, might truly mean what they say, that old evil sparks to life and they prove they are just the same monster.

And that's how she's survived him all these years.

She placated the monster.

And that's exactly where she went.

Back to Rune.

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Chapter 5

Cora

MY HAND SHAKES AS I take the thick stone stairs toward the front door. I glance over my shoulder at Rune's driver as he pulls the SUV around the back of the house. The entire drive here, Conner kept glancing at me in the rearview, no doubt wondering if Rune did this to me.

I wonder whether it bothers him. Seeing me so many times over the years with bruises or a fucked-up face. I doubt it. He's never said a damn thing as he's driven me home from a visit with Rune, my face still streaked with tears because Rune got a little too rough with me yet again. Conner probably thinks it comes with the territory. Men like Rune do what they want. It's their world, and I'm trapped in it.

Little does he know I stay for Delly. For Clyde. And now for the men.

They need me.

Which is why I've taken great pains to ensure no one saw me return to my condo. The taxi dropped me off at the park, and I walked the two blocks, then took the side entrance so the doorman wouldn't spot me, then rode the service elevator up to my floor. I stayed long enough to shower and change, then called for Rune's driver, making sure I was in my condo when I powered on my phone in case whatever tracking method Rune uses can pinpoint my exact location.

After what he did, his paranoia must be through the roof, which means I need to tread carefully. Rune knows I'll return to him. The first

time Rune hit me, the second Clyde saw my face, he screamed and raged, threatening to rain hell on whoever touched me. I lied and said I was mugged outside a club I snuck into. The number of times I've covered for Rune sickens me. But I'll do it again, because this time, I'm not protecting Rune's dirty secret. I'm protecting Clyde's.

Which is why I'm here, walking up the driveway, my heart in my throat, pressing the code into the keypad on the door. Opening it and stepping into the large foyer.

Calling his name.

"Papa?" My voice echoes around the large space. Right when I turn to shut the door, he appears. My insides rattle almost as violently as his touch.

Rune steps from his office and moves toward me, his brows pinched like he's shocked—concerned even—about what he sees. Like he's not the one who bashed my head into my floor and forced himself on me. Like he isn't the reason I'm battered and bruised and trembling, standing in the home of the only place I could go in order to keep everyone around me safe.

"Cora," he breathes, cupping my face. "My sweet girl."

He looks so sad, and there's a part of me that wants to laugh because how dare he look so fucking wounded.

He tucks me to his chest, and I have to clench my jaw to keep from screaming. He's still wearing the same clothes. The same tie, same pants. I bet my scent clings to him. I bet my anguish and his cum still cover his dick.

"God." Rune pulls away, eyes moving from my cheek to the bruise on my forehead. The sadness that was there vanishes, his mask slipping off since no one is here to witness. "You're a mess."

"I'm sorry," I say, and my voice trembles. I don't have to act. The tearing sensation in my chest gets harder and harder to bear each time I return to him, begging for forgiveness, for sins I never committed.

"I fucking hate this," he says, voice rough, verging on callous. "You make me so angry, and look?"

"I'm sorry I made you mad." I drop my eyes to the floor, flexing my fingers to keep from balling them into a fist and smashing it into his face.

I'm here to grovel. To forgive him. Be his forgiveness to himself maybe. I wonder now if that is what I have always been. An outlet for his

anger. Not just at my mother but at himself. I wonder too, if over the years, I became the place he goes when he needs to repent for all his sins. He ruins me, and I give him the gift of my forgiveness. I keep quiet. Say nothing. I cover up his marks. Keep a smile on my face.

Be his sweet Cora and absorb his violence with barely a whimper.

But this is the last time.

I'm going to ruin him before he destroys me.

"Come here," he says, pulling me toward the kitchen. Rune flicks the light on as we enter and pulls out a chair, motioning for me to sit. Those eyes soften slightly as he scans me, then brushes his fingers over my hair. This is what makes it all so confusing. He almost looks like the loving man who raised me.

"You certainly know how to anger me," he says. "Zane called the wedding off, and I saw everything I worked for, all my connections, falling apart."

"What do I do?" I ask. "To change Zane's mind?"

Please, say nothing.

"Nothing," Rune says. He steps back, eyes falling to between my thighs. Fear sparks, making my heart race, but he pats my head, then gathers a mug and a box of tea from the cabinet. "I'm angry, but we have more important matters to tend to than Zane's ego."

Like the Snyder Group.

And that Breaker put Zane in the hospital.

"How is he?" I ask.

Rune fills the kettle and places it on the stovetop. "The surgery went well, but he needs time to heal."

I bite my lip to keep from smiling, but my glee evaporates when Rune turns, his eyes locking onto mine. Cold. Sharp. The kitchen suddenly feels too small, the walls closing in as he continues to stare at me in silence.

Rune pulls the chair from the table and it screeches through the room. He sits down and last night blasts through me, hitting me so hard that I have to take a breath.

When he rubs my back, I force myself not to flinch. Rune terrifies me in a way that no other person ever has. I may have been able to appease him by spreading my legs in the past, but last night proved that tactic won't work anymore. Yet, there's an eerie stillness to him this morning, setting my

teeth on edge. Like he poured all his rage into me last night, emptied himself of all his meanness.

His fingers weave into a curl and he pulls it tight, then lets it spring free. “Why did Zane call it off?” he asks. “You said you don’t know why, but I have a feeling that’s a lie.”

My throat closes up, and my brain empties. I blink, suddenly not knowing how to act. What would I do if I wasn’t lying? It’s hard to say, because I’m usually lying—*yes Papa, I’m fine, yes papa I want to play, yes Papa, that feels good*—whenever I’m around Rune. But none of that will work. Not with how he’s scrutinizing my every movement.

I would wonder why this is harder now, but I know the answer.

There’s too much at stake.

I lick my lips, unsealing them, and lie. “I don’t know.” My voice wavers slightly on the last word. Rune’s eyes narrow slightly. “Like I said before, I’m clueless. I didn’t know he called it off until you told me.”

My gaze drops to my lap, clasping my hands tightly together, willing them not to shake as fear runs jagged nails up my back. I’m too tense and we both know it. Rune grips my chin, forcing my focus back on him.

“You better not be lying,” he says, voice gentle, but I hear the threat. His hand drops and he settles back in his seat with a smile that makes my gut churn. When he meets my eyes again, there’s that slick look to them that always makes my insides crawl.

Heat. Lust. The knowledge that he can use me as he sees fit and I don’t protest. Not usually. Because when I do, it never ends well for me. And after he’s put me back in my place, he knows I’ll crawl to him, on hands and knees if need be, apologies and promises to obey spilling along with my tears, just to get back into his good graces.

“Come here, sweet girl,” Rune says, hand slipping into my hair.

He pulls me close and presses his lips to my forehead. That old combination of fragile hope that maybe he’ll change, tinged with disgust, rattles my heart. These moments always confused me before. But I know he’s truly incapable of love. He’s never loved me. And Delly is simply his shining gold star he has controlled as much as me, just differently.

But not anymore.

Rune leans back, looking into my eyes. “You’re going to make this up to me.”

My heart drops to my feet.

“When I ask something of you, you will do it. Right?”

I nod, my jaw clenched to stop the tears. “Yes, Papa,” I whisper. “Anything.”

“Good,” he says, patting my head, and relief floods me. It wouldn’t have been the first time Rune took me after hurting me to the point of bruises. He’s just never done it in the kitchen where anyone would catch him.

Behind us, the kettle screams, and I jolt so hard my knees hit his. With another dark look my way, Rune eases from the chair, then pours steaming water into the mug. He sets it down in front of me with a loud *clink* that crashes through the kitchen.

“He refused the amount I offered,” Rune says, watching me. “Another fucking game.”

“What?” I ask sharply, sitting upright. “They asked for money?”

He cocks his head to the side, looking at me strangely. “He sent me a letter. An actual letter. Handwritten, refusing the amount I offered.”

Money? I wrap my hands around the mug, letting the warmth center me, absorbing this.

“I didn’t hear from him for weeks,” he says. “It took Zane demanding your return to get him to respond. I offered money for her from the beginning, but he refused, saying it wasn’t enough.”

Because he doesn’t want a ransom.

“Now he’s gone dark again, refusing to communicate,” Rune says. “I even offered a larger amount. But no response means he’s refusing to negotiate.”

Bile rises in my throat, the one word rattling in my head, in my ribcage, against my heart, watching numbly as Rune pulls eggs from the fridge.

Negotiate.

I swallow the rising wave of fury, picturing their father’s face. The cold man with icy eyes and gray hair. The one who’s controlling this entire game.

The one who ordered them to send me back.

Lifting the mug to my mouth, I glance at Rune. “Did they say they wanted money for us? Those men?”

He makes a sound in his throat. “Who fucking knows what they want? I don’t know why he took you to begin with.”

Because they wanted me.

"And now that they don't have you, they are playing games. Negotiating a price for her release, then going silent. The greedy bastard took you, probably thinking he could rob me blind, but he didn't know about the arrangement with Zane. Not until we made it clear it was set in stone before he took you." He pats my head. "I knew I'd get you back. There was never negotiating for you."

"He?" I ask. "You mean the man who brought me back? He didn't know about the marriage?"

Rune shakes his head. "The big one."

Reaper.

"Did he say they wanted money for Delly?" I ask, meeting his eyes. "Is that why they took her?"

A smile cuts across his face, stained with cruelty. "He just wants to scare me," he says. "But he doesn't realize I know he'd never hurt my girl. He didn't have it in him the first time."

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Chapter 6

Viper

26 Years Ago, January, Age 6

SISTER BLAIR HAS YELLOW teeth and a crooked smile. I have only ever seen her face, but I know she's scrawny. Her bony elbows stick out under her habit, and skinny ankles flash when she walks. She reminds me of the serpent she talks about on Sundays. The one who slithered through the garden and told Eve to eat the apple.

Eve was smart to eat that apple, even if she's the reason we're all doomed to be sinners. I would have eaten that apple too, because who doesn't want to know things?

When I told Sister Blair this on my third day at the orphanage, she sent me to see Sister Isla, the Headmistress, which meant I had to say prayers over and over while kneeling before the altar.

"Sinful, dreadful boy," she had whispered, lips curled back from her teeth like a mean dog, shoving me to the ground so hard my knees hurt.

“All this dreadful sin is going to be your downfall.”

I think she might be right, because I have to do that a lot. Pray for forgiveness.

But not anymore. No more kneeling before Father Rupport’s altar, staring up at that wooden dead-eyed statue. It didn’t look like the gentle Savior Mum talked about. This one stared through me like I didn’t even exist. But, I’d take a hundred hours kneeling in front of Father Rupport’s altar over even a few seconds in the special room with Headmistress Isla. She always brought me there when I needed my soul cleansed.

But I don’t have to worry about that anymore either. Not the school, the purging room, or Headmistress. Not even snakes or prayers.

Three days ago, a tall, dark-haired man picked me up from the Boy’s school. He told me his name was Fallon, which sounded like a girl’s name. Headmistress said he’s the only one I’ll have to please now. Fallon told me he was my father when he led me to a shiny black car, which is an outright lie.

My father is dead.

Just like my mum.

Cancer. That’s what got her. It ate her up on the inside and took her away from me. Last year, Mum was pretty and laughing, then Father Odon was putting her in the ground and I was sent to live at Saint Theresa’s School for Boys. The social worker said I had no family, and boys and girls who have no one to claim them get sent to homes where they wait for new parents.

I didn’t want a new parent. I wanted my mum, but she was dead. Placed in the ground in a plain wooden box. I cried a lot, worried about bugs eating her body. I hated the thought of squiggly worms eating her eyes. When I told Father Odon my fears, he said that her soul now floats in the heavens. Her body was here, feeding the Earth, but she was in Heaven with God watching over me, making sure I am safe. But I’m not so sure about that. Or maybe she got lost on her way up there because it seems no one is watching out for me anymore.

Because if there were, I think someone would punish the Sisters that live in the boy’s home. Sister Blair may have gross teeth and swears I’m a terrible boy, but she’s nowhere near as mean as Headmistress Isla.

But I don’t have to worry about her anymore, though. As Sister Blair likes to say, I have bigger problems right now.

My new father brought me to a new school, and I don’t think I’m going to like it here.

So far, I like nothing about it. Especially this room. It’s dark and cold, and I’m really hungry, since I haven’t eaten in days. The emptiness makes my stomach rumble over and over.

Pressing my hand to my belly, I push in hard to stop the pain. I open my eyes, leaving behind the images of the school, Sister Blair, and Headmistress Isla, and the prayers, but I’m met with darkness, so I close them again. Not like there’s anything to see in here. I’m alone, nothing besides the rats that crawl over my feet if I sit too still and the bugs that find their way under my shirt. There’s no furniture, just old walls with peeling blue paint. I only know they are blue because I saw the pretty color right before things went dark.

My new father shut the metal door after he told me to stay still and quiet. When the lock snapped in place, I knew I was in trouble. When the lights went off, I didn’t even bother with prayers.

I still don’t as I curl up tighter, pressing my back to the cold wall, letting my head fall forward. The ache in my belly has grown, so I know I’ve been here a few days. I can tell because that’s how long Sister Isla would keep me in the purging room, asking for forgiveness as she stood behind me, whispering prayers intended to cleanse my soul. Even though she said my soul was cleansed I don’t think it really was, because every time I left the room, I felt dirtier than before.

I’m dirty now. And cold. But at least I’m not sweating like in the purging room with all the candles. But piss still wets my pants leg. I tried to aim for the floor, but I can’t see anything, so it splashed back on me.

I glance toward the thin line of light under the door, wondering when Fallon or that boy will return.

The first day Fallon brought me to the new school, he led me through the large metal gates and empty halls with torn vinyl floors. He told me I was going to learn how to be a soldier, but I had to pass a test first. My real father, he’d been a soldier, but I don’t think that’s the kind Fallon meant. I hope not because my da died as a soldier, and I don’t want to die.

I’m only six.

My mum would have been twenty-four.

She was pretty. Not like the sisters at Saint Theresa’s.

Pretty like a winter day. Pale, with bright eyes that looked like the sky.

I don’t remember my da. He died before I was born, Mum said. But I saw pictures of him, and I have his face. Mum said I have her eyes and lips, but everything else was my da’s through and through. I even inherited his temper.

That growly, painful feeling winds my belly up again, and I wince, but I refuse to cry any more.

The first day here, I cried. Then I fell asleep long enough that when I woke, I knew it was the next day. I knew because the tiny line of light from under the door was a different color, not the blue fluorescent light like before, which meant it was daylight.

The second day in this room, I sat in my corner where he told me to sit and sang the songs my mum used to sing to me, but I sang them in my head so the boy who comes to stand by the door every few hours wouldn’t hear.

When the boy asked me if I was alive, I didn’t answer out of spite. If he wanted to know, he could open the thick metal door Fallon locked and see for himself.

Fallon. My new father has to come back soon and unlock that door. I’m not stupid. He didn’t give Sister Isla all that money to fix broken things at Saint Theresa’s if he planned on letting me die.

Another one of my da’s traits, my mum said I possess.

I’m nosey. But it’s only because I like to know things. Information, Mum said, is as valuable as gold and can get you out of any situation. That’s why I listen a lot.

On the second day, I moved around a bit. My butt was numb, so I stood up, using the wall to guide me, and walked the entire room, counting each corner as I went. When I came back to the fourth, I sat down and took off my shoes to rub my toes.

They are still cold, my whole body is, but it’s no worse than the ice baths Sister Isla gave me.

A grating sound to my left snags my attention away from thoughts of Eve and apples and repenting for sins I haven’t even committed. It’s the sound of metal scraping metal, like when he left and locked the door. The door swings inward, and a bright blue-tinged light casts a long line over the

concrete floor. I blink, trying to focus, but my eyes sting, so I press them closed really tight, willing tears to soothe them, but nothing comes.

I'm too thirsty.

"*Syn*." His deep voice makes my shoulders tense, as does the word.

He keeps calling me that, even though it's not my name. Makes me wonder if Headmistress told him I was full of bad things, so he thinks it's my name now.

I open my eyes. They land on a bright metal belt buckle, then travel up the buttons of a gray vest over a white shirt, like those fancy men on TV wear, to the tie at his neck. It's pale blue, like his eyes.

"Fallon," I say, but my voice cracks. "Can I come out now?"

The light from behind him only catches half his face, but that's all I need to see to notice the way his brows turn down.

I wonder what I said that was confusing.

"I'm right hungry." My belly growls as I push myself up, knees trembling, but I don't feel nearly as bad as when I left the purging room. He frowns, so I say, "Some bread?" I tack on a *please* to see if that will help.

Fallon's face twists weirdly. Like he's not sure what to make of my words. He speaks differently, so maybe I sound as strange to him as he does to me. His pale blue eyes slide from my face down to my belly. I drop my hand from my stomach, not wanting him to see me hurting. It always made Sister Isla smile.

I have a feeling Fallon might smile too.

"Come with me." Fallon holds out his hand, and I think for a minute before taking it. He locked me in here. I don't trust him. I didn't trust any of the sisters either, but I had to take their hands and do what they said or be punished.

I've already been punished. For what, I'm not sure. But if I don't listen now, he may walk out and shut the door again.

So I take his hand.

"Where are we going?" I ask, daring a look at my hand in his. His skin isn't as fair as mine. He has large, strong hands, with long fingers. My hand looks fat and small in his. I wonder if my real da had big hands like Fallon's. I wonder if I will when I'm older. Sister Isla always said I'm going to be a big, strapping man. Maybe that's why she always paid me so much attention.

“Am I getting food?” I ask, and can’t help but press my belly again. I feel like bugs are in my belly, eating my stomach.

Fallon stops in the middle of the hall and looks down at me. “You’re a curious boy.”

His face has that strange look again. I’m not sure if he thinks I’m odd or if I ask too many questions. So I nod. “Yes, sir.”

That strange look slips off his face, and he frowns. I forget to ask if he wants me to call him Father, Fallon, or sir when we start walking again.

“Am I going back to the room after I eat?” I ask, as he guides me down the hall. I point back behind us to the open metal door. “Back to that room?”

The hallway looks just as it did when Fallon led me through the new school the other day. Dull. Paint chipped in places.

“No, *syn*,” he says, glancing down at me. It’s the same look Sister Blair would give me when she would take me back to my room after my cleansing. A little uneasy and wholly bewildered. Like I was a beast set free of a cage and she wasn’t quite sure what to do with me. “You’re going to have your own room, and go to classes with your brothers.”

“Brothers?” I’ve never had a brother, and I’m not sure I want one now.

He tells me he’ll explain later, so I bite my tongue, not wanting to make him mad. If he gets mad, he may put me back in that room.

We take a left, then another left. Then a right. A few small windows with bars over them show that it’s daytime outside like I thought, but the sky is dull gray like it’s about to rain.

We turn onto a long hall with rows and rows of metal doors. Fallon points to the door with bubbling gray paint and rust spots. “This will be your room.”

“Will I get locked in there too?” I ask. I don’t like the idea, but at least he didn’t mention a purging room, so maybe it won’t be too bad here. Unless he’s waiting to tell me that part. Keeping it secret, like the sisters did. “In my room, I mean?”

Fallon stops again and places a hand on my shoulder, guiding me through a door with a white outline man on the front.

A bathroom.

My stomach twists.

“Let’s get you clean clothes,” he says.

I look down at my clothes, wondering if I can convince him I don't need a cleansing. They aren't very dirty, just some streaks of dirt and dust, mostly around my knees and bottom. Besides the pee on my leg, they're pretty clean. My arms are grubby, and I would bet my hair is a mess, but I'm not too filthy. It was only three days. I've endured far longer during a purging.

Besides, I didn't make a bowel movement, and managed to hold it, which I'm glad. It would have been terrible to sit in that room with the stench, though I have a feeling the rats and bugs would have been happy. Headmistress Isla always made me clean my waste after my penance. Even though my knees and body were sore, I did it without complaint or a single tear.

I want to cry now, though, and I have to bite my lip to stop it from trembling.

From the center of the tiled room, I watch as Fallon gathers supplies.

White bar soap.

A white towel.

My breathing turns heavy. My belly twists for a different reason. Needles start pricking the tips of my fingers and a dull sound hums in my head. Like the devil's snakes are in there whispering.

This is why I stopped praying. Bad things just seem to find me no matter what I do.

Fallon turns the water on and then points to the shower stall.

"Take a shower," he says, then gestures to a stack of grey clothes. "Put on your uniform and then meet me in the hallway. You have ten minutes."

He walks to the door, and my heart jumps.

"You aren't going to cleanse me?" I ask.

He stops just before he reaches for the door. When he turns to face me, his brows are pointed down again, like two black lines making a V. "Do you need me to bathe you?"

I shake my head so fast, a curl falls into my face. "No, sir."

Fallon nods, gaze moving up and down, but not like how Sister Isla always did, then leaves.

The second the door slams shut, I rush forward searching for a lock, my heart beating so hard I feel it might rattle right out of me. When I don't

see one, my hands start to shake, but then Fallon's deep voice says from the other side of the door, "Ten minutes, *syn*."

My shoe slides over the cracked white tile as I take a step back. My eyes move to the stack of clothes, then the running shower.

Ten minutes.

I had better hurry before he changes his mind.

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Chapter 7

Cora

WARMTH SEEPS FROM THE mug into my hands. I take a sip of the tea Rune made me, my brain scrambled from everything Rune said.

I know the men never wanted money for Delly. But maybe negotiating a term and focusing on money keeps suspicion off Clyde or Ben aka Breaker. On my return flight here, that was my first thought. That they've been communicating.

Now I know they have.

My eyes track Rune's as he moves around the kitchen, frying eggs and making toast. Acting as if last night never happened.

Fucking psychopath.

He still hasn't hired new staff or security, and I can only guess that when Clyde said he was waiting to hear from their father, leaving himself exposed and vulnerable was a sign of peace. His version of waving a white flag, confident their father won't come after him. Because he truly believes that money is an acceptable exchange for his daughter's life.

That the men simply want money as payment for their brother's life.

It's always about money with him.

"There you are." Clyde's voice cracks through the kitchen and my head snaps toward the doorway, my heart nearly exploding. For a split second, relief floods my system, but it's short-lived when I lock in on Clyde's face.

He’s clean shaven as usual, the Windsor knot of his tie sitting perfectly centered. If you didn’t know him, you’d think he looked exactly the same. But a calculated coldness turns his features hard. Turns the deep brown of his eyes fiery, ready to burn the world around him.

Clyde’s ruinous gaze locks on Rune as he moves toward him. His eyes drift to the knife block feet away. My pulse hammers in my throat. I grip my mug, waiting for him to grab Rune and punch him, over and over until he’s bloody and raw. For him to snatch a knife and stab him.

But then Rune drops the spatula into the pan, faces him and says, “Where the fuck have you been?” and within a fraction of a second, the murderous look vanishes, falling away as Clyde slips on his mask.

He even smiles. “Is a man not allowed to sleep?” Reaching for a mug, he snags up the carafe and pours himself coffee. “When the fuck are you getting Claudia back? I miss her coffee.” He turns around and his dark eyes land on me. “Jesus. What the fuck happened to you?”

My thoughts scatter into a million pieces. When I left, I figured Clyde would have enough foresight to let me handle this like I always have. That he’d figured out this isn’t new, and I have dealt with Rune before.

Maybe he has, and that’s exactly why he’s here.

So I don’t have to do this alone.

“I fell in the shower,” I blurt out, so obviously lying that I cringe. Clearing my throat, I set the mug down gently. “Last night. When I was at my condo to get clothes.”

Clyde crosses the room, hooking a finger under my chin to examine my face. His thumb brushes my cheek. The concern I see turning his eyes softer is real. There is no faking that.

“I let you out of my sight for five fucking minutes, girl,” Clyde grumbles.

“You know me. Always the klutz,” I say, watching Rune from the corner of my eye.

Clyde’s focus lingers on the bruise on my cheek, a dark edge turning his demeanor icy, and I swear I see the moment he realizes the amount of times I’ve lied to his face, covering for Rune.

His hand drops and that cold intensity shifts to Rune. My fingers curl into my jeans, my entire body tense as I wait for the explosion of rage. Something. Anything.

But there’s nothing.

Is that disappointment souring my belly?

"What are we doing about Zane?" Clyde asks, backing away to open the fridge and pulling out the creamer.

And like that, it's over. The fear, my careful movements to make sure Rune never suspects Clyde knows the truth, and in a moment it's done.

I blink back tears as Clyde pours creamer into his mug. Sips it, making conversation with Rune, marveling at how easy this is for him. To lie. Pretend.

But I keep forgetting. He's had years of practice.

"It was a warning," Rune says, back to checking on the eggs and pretending he's a good, decent man. A father who cooks breakfast for the girl he took in and raised like his own. He flicks the burner off and slides the fried eggs onto a plate, then butters the toast like normal.

I pick up my mug. Sip my tea. Act normal.

I may be good at this too, but I'll never be used to it.

"A warning?" Clyde asks. "Because we forced his hand?"

"More than likely." Rune sets the plate down and slides it my way. "When I had Zane contact him, requesting her return with zero fuss, I imagine he was furious. Probably why he waited so long to bring her back. Just to spite me."

"And to spite Zane," Clyde adds. "I think he hates him more than I do."

"Might be why they took Cora too. Just to piss him off," Rune says, handing me a fork. "They only needed Delilah to get my attention."

My stomach tumbles oddly. I had known they didn't need me for their plan, yet hearing Rune say it out loud hits differently. The wall of pictures and information they gathered on us over the years flashes through my mind. I wasn't the target, Delly was, yet they took me.

They wanted me too.

Not just for a plan, not just because I could be used as a tool.

They wanted me.

All of them.

I inhale, sitting up straighter, that knowledge solidifying my resolve. Reaper needs information, so I'm going to get it.

"Come on," Clyde says, shaking me from my thoughts. He shoves the runny eggs and dry toast toward Rune. "You eat this shit. I'm going to get Cora a proper breakfast."

***

To say that the car ride to Clyde's house is tense is an understatement. The proper breakfast Clyde promised is a quick stop at a chain drive-through. He places the order and drops it unceremoniously into my lap without even a glance my way.

Red light after red light catches us, stretching minutes into what feels like hours. We come to a standstill on the interstate, caught in morning traffic and with each passing second, the air grows thicker with tension and everything Clyde's not saying. Explanations stack up in my throat, but I swallow them down. Clyde doesn't want excuses, and I don't want to talk about it.

It appears he doesn't either.

So we don't. I pop a few greasy hash browns into my mouth to keep it occupied instead of rambling from nerves and we sit in a heavy silence all the way to Clyde's giant white house. I've been so tense, my body on such high alert, that I can feel the crash coming on as I walk up the steps and into the immaculate and sterile mansion. The familiar sting of bleach hits my nose as we enter, making my eyes water.

"Who cleans this place?" I ask. "And who's obsessed with bleach? You or the person who cleans?"

I bet it's him.

Clyde doesn't answer as he shuts the front door, then brushes past me like I don't exist, marching down the hall toward the back of the house. Placing my now cold fast food on the large table in the center of the foyer, I follow, my stomach tumbling, making what little bits of my shitty breakfast I ate, roil in my stomach.

By the time I catch up to him, he's already at the door leading to his indoor range. Without a word, he punches in the code to unlock the door, and enters, leaving it open behind him. I take that as my cue to follow. I step through the door, inhaling the tang of metal and gunpowder.

"We're shooting?" I ask as the door slides shut behind me.

Nothing. Not a damn word.

He unlocks the large metal lockers and takes out several black rifles, magazine clips, and boxes of ammo, setting them on a nearby bench, but keeps his mouth pressed tightly closed.

Apparently, Clyde's response to my disappearing act is to give me the silent treatment.

My gaze travels around the open room, taking in the military gray walls and black lockers, still amazed that Clyde has a secret range in his home, when they land on the large black and white pictures of the ballet dancers. I step closer, drawn by the stark contrast of something so delicate in such a militant, sterile place.

Both photographs capture several dancers in various poses, showcasing the long lines of their limbs, the slim columns of their necks. The stage where they dance is old, the surface worn, lacquer bubbling and peeling from the procession arch framing it. The entire scene makes the silk hugging the dancers' lithe bodies seem far too delicate for such a harsh environment.

Each woman is young and pretty from what little I can see of their faces, but there's a severity in the look of them. A hardness the cameraman captured, adding an edge of darkness to the pictures.

"I didn't know you liked ballet," I say over my shoulder.

"I don't."

I whip around, catching him with his eyes fixed on the images. "Then why have the pictures on the wall of your secret lair?"

"First. This room isn't a secret," he says. "I had to pull permits to have it built. Second. That"—he points to the pictures—"is none of your business."

Clyde thrusts two large rifles at me—the familiar one from before and another with a compact barrel and grip. I take both, resting them on my shoulders as he gathers up the rest of the items, then hands me a pair of earmuffs before stalking to the back of the room.

The lights pop on as we walk toward the table. Clyde sets everything down, gesturing to the guns and ammo as if he wants me to set it all up, then presses buttons on the control panel. Two targets slide into place with a mechanical whirr. I glance at him occasionally as I lock clips into place, arranging the extras and boxes of ammo on the table.

"How mad is Breaker?" I focus on the rifles, avoiding Clyde's eyes.

His exhale cuts the silence. "Furious." Then a second later, "Worried. He blames himself."

"Because of Zane," I say, my stomach tumbling. Breaker's face flashes in my mind. Jaw tight, the hollowed-out expression. I blink hard,

trying to erase the image. I can't stand the thought of Breaker blaming himself for what Rune did.

"How long?" Clyde says suddenly.

I freeze, my fingers curling around the grip of a rifle, my throat tightening.

I guess we're doing this.

For a second, I debate how much of the truth I should give him, my focus on the shiny black weapon, tracing the cold metal barrel with my thumb. There's no point in lying now.

"Since right before my eighteenth birthday." The words scrape my throat, and I cough, hating how they taste in my mouth. Like dirt and ash.

Clyde's hand flies out, gripping the table like it's the only thing keeping him upright. I don't dare look his way. I don't think I can stomach what I see.

After a few deep, shaky breaths, he picks up the earmuffs and jams them over his head, covering his ears like he can't stand how harshly the truth sounds. He slides a pair of earmuffs toward me, then picks up his own rifle. I place the earmuffs over my ears, and pick up a rifle, checking the barrel, adjusting my grip, doing anything but chance looking at him. When I finally risk a glance, the expression he wears isn't what I expect. There's no rage, no disgust.

I don't know *what* I see.

Like he's seeing into me maybe. Seeing the trap I was caught in. Surrounded by powerful men who could ruin me. All the years I lied and protected Delly. Him. Myself, by staying silent.

He lifts his chin, eyes locked on me. Tearing free of his penetrating stare, I take aim and a deep breath, then pull. Bullets spray out, and I keep tapping the trigger, shredding the target as each bullet lands. His eyes bore into the side of my face as I empty the clip. Chest heaving, I lower my weapon, and face him. His gaze hasn't wavered, but the moment my magazine clicks free, his rifle snaps up and fires. He keeps shooting until the clip is empty, then sets the gun down, pushing the earmuff clear of one ear as he reloads. I do the same.

"Why didn't you come to me?" he asks, tugging at the collar of his shirt.

Inside my head screams with everything I wish I could say. *I wanted to. I was too scared. He'd hurt you.*

My vision blurs, and I swipe at my cheek with my shoulder. “He would have killed you if he had thought even for a millisecond you would betray him.”

From the corner of my eye, I see his jaw clench, his chest moving a tad too fast with each breath.

“True,” he says, voice thick, then snaps a new clip into place, slamming it with his palm with too much force, then sets the gun down. Tt’s hard to miss the tremble in his hand. He leans forward to place his hands flat on the table as if to steady himself, head dropping forward. “Does he…” the words catch in his throat, but I already know the question he can’t ask.

“He’s never laid a hand on Delly,” I say, slamming a fresh clip in place. “And she didn’t know. Not until right before I was brought back.”

A heavy sigh escapes him and his shoulders slump, then he stands upright, puts his earmuff back in place, motions for me to do the same, then fires. Each bullet lands dead center and with each hit, his body coils up tighter. Like he’s coiling all his anger and grief, gathering it inside into one dark mass, methodically. Precise. Every pull of the trigger, done with deadly precision. Which means one thing.

I’m right. He may want Rune stopped, but he wants something more.

They all do.

Jaw grinding, Clyde sets the rifle down, all that rage bottled up tightly, and punches at the control panel as he slides his earmuffs back. A new target glides into place.

“You’re going to kill him,” I say.

Clyde shoves his earmuffs back in place and snaps in a new magazine, then aims. “No. I won’t be the one killing him.”

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Chapter 8

Delilah

A COOL DRAFT SLIPS UNDER my nightgown, raising goosebumps across my skin. The wooden banister slips beneath my fingertips, cold as ice, as I climb each step, wincing when my ribs protest.

From what little I could see in the mirror this morning, bruises scatter my back, and a faint one discolors my ribcage from where Fallon kicked me. Striker said there was no broken skin, and the welts from last night have faded, leaving only a deep throb.

My reminder to obey.

A step creaks beneath my bare foot. I freeze, eyes darting upward. One would think I've learned my lesson, but here I am, once again, headed for the fourth floor where the men sleep. But this time I'm not looking for keys, or clues, or a way to escape. I'm looking for Reaper.

When I woke this morning, Striker was gone. He'd stayed with me all night, adjusting covers, but they all came loose as I tossed and turned, too restless to sleep. Each time my eyes fluttered open, I'd find him sitting up, gaze fixed on me like if he looked away, I'd vanish.

The poisonous fear Fallon inflicted was something I've never experienced before. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Fallon's cruel smirk, felt the bite of the belt against my flesh. I've never felt as helpless as I did with my arms stretched out and Fallon at my back. I couldn't stop what was happening to me. There was no way to stop what he was doing to them.

This morning, as I lay in bed watching the sun paint my bedroom in bright gold light, all I could think about was Cora. She's never had any control over what happened to her. Not only did she lose her parents in a car crash, but their reputation was destroyed after it came out they screwed Rune over in a business deal. Knowing she was innocent, my father took her in, giving her a sense of security, and raised her with me. Loved her like a father. Then, he ripped away that love. brutally. He forced things on her that no one should ever endure. In an instant, Cora lost control of her body and who had access to it.

Rune gets what he wants. Always. Whether it be by force, manipulation, or murder. My best friend lost so much when he decided he wanted her. I may have been under his thumb, but I still owned my body.

It wasn't until last night, unable to stop Fallon, did I fully understand the scope of what it means to have zero control. No amount of begging would have stopped him.

How many times did Cora beg Rune to stop? How many times did she feel that same helplessness and lack of control?

The thought twists my mind into a chaotic spiral. Shoves me to the brink of sanity, so close to the edge that I'm seeking out Reaper to make a deal.

At the top of the stairs, I pause, fingers furling around the black fabric in my hand. Reaper is hard to read, but if the last few days have taught me anything about him, he cares a hell of a lot more than he's let on. They all do. It's possible Fallon has fucked them up to the point they simply don't know how to show it. Reaper is coldness to the point of bitter, then consuming fiery heat. Hard, then soft touches. He's an oxymoron, but one thing remains constant.

His need for control.

He's controlled me since I first laid eyes on him. I've been at his mercy, playing by his rules. The night in bed with him proved it.

If I want this, I have to let him lead.

With my mind made up, I walk forward, my feet barely whispering against the cold floor. I pause at his door, noting it's slightly ajar, almost as if he knew I'd come to him. My hand freezes over the knob when his voice cuts through the silence.

"If you're planning on stealing the keys, Viper beat you to it," Reaper says, his voice slightly muffled by the door. "We're stuck here until

another car is delivered.”

I push the door open and step into his room, my heart hammering. My gaze immediately lands on him, and my pulse skyrockets.

Just like that day in the library, he stands in front of the window with his back to me, his mask off, revealing the thick black hair sleeked back over his head and the tattoos snaking up his neck from under his shirt. I eat up the sight of what little I can see of him. His ears, exposed by the hair that’s shaved close to his head. The black ink on his skin and his strong back.

Memories flood me. His taste and his touch. The filthy words that bleed from him when I do everything he wants and let him take. Let him own me. How he made me feel so cherished, then ripped it away, leaving me desperate for more.

But I won’t get more until I play along.

Be a good little Kitten.

Fallon’s visit last night taught me two things. They are controlled by him and their need for revenge. I’m controlled by them and my need to avenge the wrongs done to Cora. I could say my primary motivation is stopping the cruel, barbaric hunts, but I’d be stretching the truth. As much as I want Rune stopped, what I really want is him dead so Cora will never feel that helpless fear again.

Inching further into the room, I wait for him to slip his mask over his head, but after a few seconds, when he still doesn’t move, I realize he’s not going to.

My already rapid heartbeat thumps faster. Harder.

Touch her again, and I’ll gut you.

Reaper threatened to *kill* his father.

It wasn’t until this moment, staring at him, that I fully comprehended the significance of his words. Of their actions. Reaper and Striker stood against their father to protect me. They knew what was coming. They tried to keep him from me, but Fallon and his soldiers were too much for them.

Part of me wonders if that’s why Fallon brought so many. If he knew his sons would try to stand against him and the only way he was going to keep control was to threaten their lives.

The thought chills my blood. That they know him on this deep, dark level. That they have endured that type of abuse before. Likely things I’ll never comprehend.

Biting my lip, I debate my next few words, but then they burst out of me unchecked. “I’ll do it. I’ll kill Rune.”

Other than a slight bunching of his shoulders, he remains still.

When Reaper doesn’t respond, I take another step further into the room. “Isn’t that what you want? My cooperation?”

He shakes his head. “You’re going back.”

“Back?” I scoff. Here I wanted nothing but to go home, and now I want to stay. Continue training. Learn to shoot and kill.

Kill my *father*, of all people.

“Back,” he says, the word a single sentence. A command. Like he’s been commanding me and controlling me and fucking wrecking me.

“I’m not going back until I’m trained,” I say, and my heart kicks. I gather the black material into a fist. “You said I needed to train. Learn to defend myself. Learn to—”

Reaper shifts. I catch the flash of a high cheekbone and the side of his perfect jaw covered with dark stubble. I slam my eyes shut. My hands fumble with the black material, fingers trembling as I tie the blindfold at the back of my head. The same blindfold they all used on me just a few days ago. My ribs scream as I lower myself to my knees, placing my palms on my thighs.

The floorboards creak, and some animal part of my brain knows he’s looking my way. Can sense his eyes moving over me, taking in my kneeling form. The blindfold. Hoping he can see this for what it is.

My submission. My willingness.

“What is this?” he asks, his voice gruff. His boots scrape on the floor as he walks closer, stopping before me.

I’ve wanted so desperately to see his face. Ached for him to confess this dark need blooming between us, but now…

Now I want none of it.

The single sentence he spoke to Fallon changed everything. His actions scream with a clarity that nearly takes my breath away.

He killed to make me his.

He threatened his father to keep me safe.

But I can’t do this if he cares. And I can’t do this if I care too much.

Reaper needs to stay faceless. Unknown. If I glimpse the man beneath that mask, see what and who he truly is, he’ll be human. He’ll no longer be a faceless soldier. If I see the lines of his face, see more than those

scars on his lips, he'll be breakable, and after watching Striker kneel with a gun pressed to his head, my heart can't handle Reaper being something that can be snuffed out with a single bullet.

Not until the threat is gone. Not until I know he's safe. Until they all are.

My heart pounds, knowing that what I'm about to say may give him too much control, but deep down, I know this will only work one way.

"I'll continue training," I say. "I'll kill Rune, but I have conditions."

His fingers graze the top of my head. Delicate yet cut with a hard edge. Like being touched by a fallen angel, but then they thread through my hair, yanking my head back, exposing my throat to the cool air.

"Conditions, Kitten?" he asks, his voice taking a deeper, slightly raspy tone, coloring it with seduction and want. "My sweet girl thinks that I'll barter?"

I lick my lips as pleasure curls in my belly. I'm his sweet girl again.

That means I may get what I want.

When he grips the blindfold, I grab his wrist and grate out, "No."

His voice drops an octave. "*No*?"

"No." I exhale, my grip tightening on his hand, a silent plea.

After a moment, he releases the blindfold. "What are your conditions?"

"You will have my complete and total cooperation," I say, my shoulders relaxing. "I will do as asked. You train me in the way your father instruct—"

"No." Again, a single sentence.

My heart skitters at how harshly he barks out the word. The skin on my back pulls, reminding me that whatever they were supposed to do would have been so inhumane, I'd have been broken.

I take a deep breath and continue. "I will follow your plan. Get into the lodge. Get access to the weapons, and kill Rune."

Reaper says nothing, but the tight grip on my hair loosens and I sense him shifting again, then I feel the heat of him move closer and his hand leaves my hair and skims along my jawline, almost delicate. His thumb grazes my bottom lip, then drags to my chin. He grips it harshly, and the domineering hardness returns to his touch.

Has he ever touched me so much? So freely? Outside of sex and a few rather violent and lust-fueled encounters, he's rarely laid a hand on me.

Not like this. With such intent.

“After he’s dead, after the lodge is—” I falter, unsure about that part. He said someone else would just take his place, so that means they plan to eliminate everyone there. It makes the most sense. “Once the threat is removed, you will leave your father and no longer follow his commands.”

The silence is so heavy it feels like a hot, humid summer day. When the threat of a violent storm gathers overhead. Except this storm is in front of me, and I’m asking it to change itself. Remove all it knows and leave.

I know how that feels. To suddenly be asked to kill a part of your life, your history, and carry on blindly.

Taking a deep breath, I gather his scent into me, using his fire and heat to center my thoughts. “After it’s done. You leave him. All of you.”

It’s so silent, my breathing feels like it’s as loud as a train.

I sense him move again, hear leather creaking, feel the air shift. Taste his dark scent and feel his presence shift closer, so I know he’s crouched before me. I wonder if he's looking at me like he always does. Hungry and resentful. Warm fingers glide over my shoulder, pushing my hair back, then trail down my arm. My nipples tighten.

“And,” I say, breaths becoming ragged, my body aching for him, knowing what I’m asking may very well be impossible. “You’ll tell me everything. About the school. How you found out about the hunts.” I lick my lips, practically feeling his eyes tracking the movement. “And how Rune and Fallon know each other.”

He doesn’t respond and the silence stretches, longer and thinner. Then I feel his hands in my hair, fingers weaving through the strands. That softness has returned just as I knew it would. I wonder if his father has corrupted him to the point that he’s like him. Soft and sweet as long as their victim is compliant. Cruel and cutting when they don’t have complete control.

No.

Reaper is more.

And I’m no longer his victim.

The fingers woven in my hair leave, and he grips my arm. Reaper hauls me up, and I try not to wince as I stand. Once I’m upright, he drags his palm along my arm as he shifts behind me. He brushes my hair over my shoulder, and the tips of his fingers trail over my back like he’s touching each bruise. Goosebumps form on my arms under his delicate touch. When

he moves in closer, the heat of him molds to my back, and I sink into his hard chest, absorbing his heat and fire and the desire that leaks from him. He curls around me, snaking an arm over my middle to hold me closer. I turn my head slightly, breathing him in, relishing his nearness.

Some shift has happened between us. A silent change in him. In me too. It started with his promise to keep us, morphed that day in my room, chaining us together like I was chained to my bed. And he can't take it back.

I won't let him.

A warm breath fans my cheek, then lips press to my temple. "You're a cunning little Kitty."

Right as I'm reaching behind me, ready to take whatever he's willing to give, the distant sound of a car door slamming makes us both still. He backs away, and cool air touches me everywhere.

Reaper's boots thud on the wood floor, and the entire energy in the room seems to shift. Grow dark.

"Fuck," he hisses, and my body goes stiff.

"What?" I whisper, needles prickling up my spine from his tone.

There's movement and the thud of boots again. Reaper grips my arm and spins me. A second later, he rips the blindfold off and I'm staring at his bedroom door.

"Go to your room," he orders, planting a palm on my back and shoving me forward. "Do not come out until myself or Striker comes for you."

"What's happening?"

"Do it," he yells so loudly I jolt.

Questions swarm, but my heart's beating too hard to speak. I've only ever heard that tone in his voice once before.

I take a step forward, but stop because I know I'm right. "He's back, isn't he?"

"Go to your room," Reaper shouts. "And do as I say from here on out, Delilah."

My name. Not my pet name. Not Kitten, the little play toy he stole from Rune. Me.

I shoot forward and run for the stairs, fear overriding the pain in my ribs. My sweaty palms slip over the railing as I stumble down the steps. On the second-floor landing, I pause long enough to peer over the railing to the

foyer below. Striker rushes from the library, and his gaze immediately darts up. When he sees me, he freezes, but he doesn't need to tell me.

Fallon is here. I feel it in my gut.

Outside, the familiar slick sound of van doors sliding open cuts through the house, and bile rises in my throat. Why is he back? Is he coming to hurt them again? Hurt me to get their cooperation?

Striker's eyes dart from the front door to me, then he bolts up the stairs, two at a time. I take a step back, then turn and rush to my bedroom, knowing that whatever happens next, they're going to do everything in their power to keep me safe.

My hand lands on the door just as Striker reaches me. He grips the back of my neck and turns me to face him. Our mouths crash together, his tongue slipping past my lips. I clutch his hair, like my grip alone might keep him safe. He breaks the kiss and backs away, then shoves me backward. I stumble over the threshold, my heart in my throat.

Striker grips the doorknob, his eyes saying everything he's not, then shuts the door. The snapping of the lock as it slips into place hits me as harshly as the belt.

I take a step back, a strange numbness creeping through my limbs.

I said I would do this. Cooperate. Train to kill.

Betray my father.

Murder him.

And I think Fallon may have just returned to ensure that I do.

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Chapter 9

Viper

15 Years Ago, June, Age 17

KILLING IS EASY. TOO easy.

Not that I've killed before. That's not true. I've killed, but not on purpose. Not with intent. The only intentional killing I've done is when we leave the school to hunt small game in the woods. Little rabbits and squirrels caught in the snares we set up during one of the training missions we're forced to endure.

Survival. That's the purpose of those outings. Do whatever it takes to live, even at the expense of the innocent. It's human nature in its purest form. Consuming and destroying everything around us. We're the apex predator, and we're born starving for more than just food. We crave power over innocence and eat it bit by bit, leaving nothing in our wake.

I wonder sometimes what corner of the human mind is charged with devouring innocence? Why does this black hunger to destroy sing so loud in

some people’s veins while others seem untouched by it?

Is it bred into us?

Makes me think about my father, Fallon, and if it’s a generational thing. Sickness and evil passing on from one person to another, or if cruelty is taught.

Was my real father cruel?

I like to think my mother never would have loved him enough to create me if he’d been a merciless man.

But what do I know? I’m just an orphan living in a cold militant hell.

My mind shifts back to the present as water splashes onto the counter around the large metal sink. Cook’s thick, meaty shoulders come into focus.

Maybe his father was cruel.

Cook curses under his breath and drops the dishrag onto the counter with a wet smack. He drives his hand into the dark, sudsy water, submerging his thick forearms up to his elbows.

The water laps at his elbows, and I wonder how long it takes someone to drown. A few minutes? I would bet the lungs burn as the mind races, desperate for air before a person finally gives in to the clawing need to breathe, instinctively opening their mouths only to suck in a lungful of water.

What a terrifying way to go. Slowly. Painfully.

Cook casts a look over his shoulder, his thin lips pulled down into a frown as his dirt-brown eyes land on my little brother.

“Are you going to help?” he asks Breaker.

My spine straightens. I hate it when he looks at him.

Any of them.

“I’m pretty sure I’m on laundry duty this week,” Breaker says. The blue tin plate clatters loudly through the kitchen as he sets it down before pulling a stool out from under the long metal island. As he sits beside me, his bony knee hits mine. He’s still so scrawny. He shot up several inches this past year, which just makes him look skinnier. The kid is going to be tall. Probably almost as tall as Reaper and Hunter. Maybe even taller.

Breaker’s knee nudges mine again, and he glances my way, checking my reaction. I don’t think he realizes how much he looks at me. I cast a look around the kitchen, making sure my brothers aren’t paying attention. Though I’m sure they notice how much he looks at me.

Hunter catches my eye and smirks. I drop my gaze to my bowl. We're all gathered around the metal island, eating breakfast. If oatmeal and nuts are considered breakfast, that is. Sometimes I wonder how Hunter and Reaper got so big with how little we eat.

"And I could be wrong," Breaker says with a mouthful, "but Striker is the dishwasher this week."

Hunter leans over the island and slaps the top of Breaker's head before pushing his stool out and heading for the sink. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Not my turn," Striker says from my left. He stands up, gathering his bowl and spoon, and makes his way around the long island, then sets them on the counter by the sink. He tosses the spoon in the soapy water and grins at Cook. "It's Hunter's."

"The fuck it is," Hunter says. "It's Reaper's turn." He lifts his chin in Reaper's direction. "He's the asshole who volunteered."

I glance at Reaper leaning against the far wall by the door. My skin pricks when I find his black eyes on me. I never know what to think of him. He's so quiet and reserved, always watching, taking in every detail with those dark eyes. Like he's able to pry your bones open, see into your soul.

I swear he knows. *Everything.*

Not taking his eyes off me, he lifts a shoulder in that arrogant way he does everything. "At least I'll know it's done correctly. None of you dirty rats knows the meaning of clean."

"Rude," Hunter says as he yanks the kitchen door open. "I'm the same as you. A clean, mean, sexy machine."

Reaper rolls his eyes, and I can't help but smile. It's rare to see him react to anything. Even rarer to see him smile, but Hunter does that. Pulls smiles and happiness out of a person. Pulls the humanity. What it's supposed to be. Kindness. Care. Gentleness toward one another. Everything that our father has tried to rip from us.

Everything that half of the population is not.

Makes me wonder which half is our true nature. Cruel, cunning. Murderous. Or soft, gentle, and giving. *Forgiving*. Maybe it's both, and that's why I feel so cut up inside.

"Viper is better at scrubbing everything clean," Cook says, eyeing me over his shoulder.

I shoot him my middle finger, my gaze dropping to his ass. It's flat like a pancake. Like he got kicked so many times, every ounce of fat was shoved forward into his gut.

"Reaper will train Striker today." Father's voice snaps through the room like a whip. I jolt at the sound, tearing my eyes from Cook to look at my food, my heart beating frantically. The last thing I want is for Father to catch me looking at him.

"Hunter can train him," Reaper says. I look up long enough to see him push off the wall and walk towards Cook, snatching the rag from his hand and shouldering him aside. "I'm on dish duty."

"Hunter isn't *you*," Father snaps, the icy tone making us all freeze. "And I'm not asking."

Cook smirks, but he swipes it away as he rubs his jaw.

Reaper tosses the rag into the water before he turns and leans back, hands braced behind him on the metal sink. Sometimes I wish I had his arrogance. Then again, maybe I do, and that's why I'm always in trouble.

"In the yard," Father snaps, eyes locked on Reaper. "Now."

Breaker raises his hand, glancing between Reaper and Father. "I'll do both. I don't mind."

"No," I say a little too quickly, causing every single set of eyes in the room to look my way. *Fuck*. "I'll wash the dishes. It's not a big deal."

"It's a big deal," Reaper says, his ink-black eyes locked on mine. "A very big deal."

My gut twists, and I do my best not to react. There is no way he knows.

Cook points at me. "Let Viper do it. He's still got to make up for the jars of peanut butter he broke."

"No." Father's tone goes glacier-cold on Reaper before he points at him and Striker. "You two. Training yard." His gaze shifts to Breaker. "You wash dishes and then join Reaper and Striker in the yard." He looks at me, and then points to the door. "You follow me to my office."

My shoulders slump as I sigh. I slide off the stool reluctantly and follow him down the hall, our boots echoing through the nearly empty school. There's only a few of us left, and Seeker and Raid keep to themselves, so the four of us are together most of the time. With the threat of the wilderness trail in two months, everyone is on edge. Only two come

back, and I have a feeling Hunter and Reaper will make damn sure it's them at all costs. Even if it's their humanity.

When we reach Fallon's office, he pulls the large set of keys from his pocket and unlocks the door and then walks through, leaving it open after he enters, expecting me to follow. I do. We all do.

"Sit," he says, shoving the keys back into the pocket of his sleek charcoal pants before sitting behind his glossy desk.

I do, slouching just to piss him off. At the edge of the desk sits wood frames with photos of people I've never met. Hunter swears they're Father's friends, but it seems impossible he has any. Men like Father don't have friends. Especially not handsome men with beautiful wives and a pretty little girl with raven-black hair. Hunter even told us their names. Said that he and Father went way back.

"Son." Father's stern tone cuts through my thoughts and rips my eyes from the perfect family, wondering how it would feel to have that. A mom who didn't get eaten up by cancer and a father who was nice and made us smile like that little girl.

Father adjusts his chair and folds his hands on top of his desk. His cold eyes turn even icier, and I sit upright, my spine stiffening with dread.

We're going to have this conversation again. I just know it.

"I had hoped the last time we discussed this, we'd not have to talk about it again," Father says. "Need I remind you that your behavior is unacceptable?"

"I volunteered," I remind him, even though I know that isn't what he's talking about. "You're the one who refused—"

His pointed look has me shutting my mouth.

"It's inappropriate," he says, and my cheeks grow hot. "Do I need to be concerned?"

"No, sir." Avoiding his disapproving glare, I focus on his mouth. When it turns down into a frown, I know what's coming. "It's a sin, my son." The whispered disappointment makes the embarrassment already flooding me turn up a million degrees.

I swallow, dropping my eyes to his hands.

A sin.

Not mine, but mine because it touches me.

I clear my throat. "It is."

Father sighs, leaning back in his seat. “I feel like I may have failed you.”

I shake my head, clenching my teeth.

“Is it because of what happ—”

“No,” I snap, a little too loudly. *God.* Why does he always *do* this? Bring it up? Like that part of my past means I’m forever fucked up. Maybe I am. I meet his eyes. “Is that what you think of me?”

His shoulders slump, and he looks a little taken aback. Nobody questions him, but this conversation makes me sick every time we have it. “Of course not. But this part of you, this…” He lets his voice trail off, his silence saying what he’s too cowardly to voice.

I don’t know why I let it bother me, or why I crave his approval. He’s a cruel, selfish man who has spent years training us, nearly killing most of us.

He’s our father. Our Commander. Our fucking waking nightmare, and yet I still want to please him. Make him proud even when I know deep down just me being me is a disappointment.

If we’d been raised outside of this dark, hellish place, would I be what Father deemed normal? I don’t think so. Some things just live in us, things we’re born with, and I doubt we’d be created that way if it truly was a sin.

Pushing up from the chair, I adjust my uniform. “I am full of sin. I get it. May I leave?”

“Has he said something to you?” Father searches my face, brows knitting. “Made an advance of some kind?”

That’s why I want his approval. These rare moments when he actually gives a shit make me forget he’s a monster. Like that day all those years ago when I was given my name.

“No, sir,” I say. “As I said before, he’s done nothing wrong.”

“Has he made advances toward you or toward any of your brot—”

“No, sir,” I say, cutting him off.

Father’s jaw grinds, and that kindness, that last shred of humanity that clings to him, disappears. “You are dismissed.” I turn to leave, but stop when he says, “You know that’s not what I meant, Viper. I only mean—”

“I thought I was dismissed?” I say, not looking his way. “Because I’d rather be shoved into isolation than talk with my father about unholy desires.”

He lets out a sigh. I think I'm the only one who exasperates him this much. Besides Reaper and Hunter.

"Or does this sin require a whipping?" I ask, meeting his eyes over my shoulder. "To remove it from me?"

I know I'm pushing him, but I can't seem to help myself.

"Watch your tongue," he snaps, pushing up from his seat. I shift slightly, waiting for the command to go to ISO, but he says, "I'll speak with Cook. It is obvious—"

"Don't," I say so quickly Father's brows raise but I'm not sure if it's from the fact I've cut him off once again or from my vehement response.

He studies me, then nods. My shoulders relax. It's better he thinks I'm too embarrassed to have him talk to Cook than the alternative.

"Very well," he says. "I'll take your word that this… unappetizing feeling is under control."

I nod, my stomach roiling.

Father waves at the door, and like that, the conversation we have had once every few months for what feels like forever comes to an end.

I leave his office and rush down the hall, my feet moving so fast, they're almost keeping up with my heartbeat. I reach the kitchen and spot Cook and Breaker at the sink. Cook lets out a gross, garish laugh, and his hand moves to Breaker's thin shoulder.

"Move," I bark out, shoving my way between them. Breaker stumbles a little, casting me a frown. I nod toward the door. "I'll do this. You get the laundry before Maxy has a breakdown over that stain on your shirt."

He glances down at his gray shirt and swipes at the smudge, muttering a curse.

When he leaves, Cook nudges my shoulder with his. "Another warning?" he asks and winks.

"Fuck you," I say.

Minutes to drown? I wonder if the incinerator where we burn the trash would be faster. Probably. He deserves to suffer, so maybe drowning is best.

"Better be careful," he says, his singsong voice, slipping under my skin like maggots. "One day he's going to figure it out."

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Chapter 10

Viper

LATE AFTERNOON SUN HEATS the asphalt. It’s technically winter, but this far south the temperature still hovers in the lower 70s. A warm breeze sweeps across the lot, and I tug at my short-sleeved black shirt, glad I changed before I left. Between traffic, road construction, idiot drivers, and having to stop for gas, the drive took far longer than normal.

But I’m here now. Even if it’s late in the day.

Swiping hair off my forehead, I punch the code into the keypad outside the garage. The metal door rattles shut. I expect Breaker to barge out of the factory, all hell and spit-fire, spewing one question after another. Like, why the fuck am I here? Why did I leave our girl? Don't I think he’s capable of handling this on his own?

His ability to protect Cora isn’t the problem. He’s capable. More than. Lethal when he needs to be. It’s not a lack of confidence in him that brings me here, to this old, worn-down place we called our base for years. It’s the hollow ache that’s been spreading through my chest since he left, the phantom limb pain of missing a vital part of myself.

Seven days without him feels like seven years.

Reaper is going to have my head for taking the SUV, but my skin has been crawling with inaction. Waiting does nothing. Waiting has just brought us more problems.

Like our little Vixen being sent back to her abuser.

My jaw tightens until pain shoots through my temple. Problem now, I'm away from Delilah. From all of them.

Fuck.

Striker's face flashes in my mind. I left on impulse, without telling anyone. I'm going to have to contend with not only a furious Reap, but an angry and hurt Striker. We made a pact in that dark prison we called home. Until Breaker left.

And now me.

But we made a pact with them too. With our delicate little warriors, and I'll be damned if an order is going to keep me away from her. I'll be damned if she's going to fight this alone.

Part of me wonders if this was Reaper's plan all along. He knew Breaker would follow Cora. And he knew I'd follow, unable to sit still and wait.

But, now I'm here. But it seems Breaker isn't, since he's not out here yelling at me. He's probably off watching over Cora or Rune. The security cameras should have pinged his phone the moment I arrived. I unlock my phone and wait, expecting him to see me on the security camera, but after a minute, when he doesn't message or call, I tuck my phone in my back pocket and head toward the side of the factory.

It's been a month since I've been here, and it's strange to feel this slight comfort at being back. This isn't home. The cliffs, the woods, the salty marsh, the huge empty house with its ghosts and ruined gardens, are home. This place was never meant to be anything but temporary. Yet it's familiar, and I move toward the door with an airiness in my bones, a jitteriness in my fingertips, knowing I'm going to see him soon if not right now. Knowing that even though I have to keep my cover, I will see Cora at some point. If Breaker got his hands on her, then I will too, even if I have to tear this city apart brick by fucking brick.

When I unlock the door, my hand freezes on the door handle. Something cold slithers beneath my ribs, settling in my gut. Something that feels an awful lot like dread. Intuition maybe? Or just the knowledge that when I enter the building, there is no going back. I will become part of the Snyder Group, and will eventually have to come face to face with Rune.

The reality is almost deafening with how it screams through my thoughts. When we planned this, we knew we were going to have to face Rune. Pretend to be his ally. Pretend to be just as thirsty for evil.

At the time, revenge was a hungry beast, driving us all, turning us just as mad as him. Now there is so much at stake. Now there is so much knowledge.

Before, Rune was a monster who fed off terror, driven with a grotesque hunger I'll never comprehend. And never forget.

But now? Now we *know*.

He's Cora's tormentor. Delilah's pain.

He's a vile cancer that needs to be cut out.

With that thought, I shove the door open. The metal hinges protest with a rusty screech that echoes through the large space. When I step through the door, my gaze lands on him sitting on the couch.

And the gnawing itch that's lived under my skin since he left fades, and a pulsing need courses through me as I drink in the sight of him.

Breaker sits on the sofa, jaw clenched, shoulders rigid under his black t-shirt. My fingers twitch with the need to trace the powerful line of his jaw. Breaker is the only man—well, until recently—the only man who has ever made me ache so deeply. For his touch. His mouth. His want. Everything that makes him is so perfect and fiercely beautiful. He always felt like an angel placed in my life to keep me sane.

Until I started noticing he wasn't an angelic boy anymore. He had structure and substance. He grew into a man, and every feature cut me with a need I knew was bad but couldn't control.

Then one night in that ratty hotel room brought all that need to a boiling point. I surrendered to what I'd been fighting since he grew from that beautiful boy into the hard, lethal man before me. I avoided him for months after that. Couldn't bear to see the hurt in those pale blue eyes. The way he longed and ached. The confusion, and how my refusal left him so bruised. It's tragic it took Hunter's death to force me to let go and claim what I wanted.

Even more tragic, I refused to speak it openly for so long.

Now? Now I want to scream it so everyone knows that this desire for him is pure and good and I don't have to feel shame. It's not a sin.

Watching Striker accept the things I struggled with in secret made it easier to accept them within myself. And we have our girls to thank for that.

Cora.

God. I can't wait to see her. Get my hands on her.

I march forward, my heart expanding with each step. He must not hear me because he still doesn't move as I approach. It isn't until I'm right on him that his head jerks my way, eyes widening when he sees me. I expect a snarky remark, but he just stares at me, expression turning from shock to…

Dread

Suddenly he snaps out of it, and says, "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you too, asshole." I say, eating up the sight of his hard, muscled body, noting how his shoulders bunch and his arms go tense. How his jaw tightens even more, his plush lips thinning.

I circle the couch, tracking the rise and fall of his chest, counting each breath the way I counted the days without him. I stop in front of him, the coffee table between us. All I can think about is wrapping my arms around him and breathing him in, and it takes everything in me not to do just that. Kick all obstacles out of my way and pull him to me until there's nothing separating us.

Fuck, I've missed this stupid, impulsive idiot.

"You can't be here," he says, bolting up from the sofa. Something passes through his pale blue eyes, making my heart skip. Dread. It's there again. Just behind his eyes, like a shadow.

My throat tightens. "What happened?"

Breaker's fingers claw at his chest, bunching the fabric like he's trying to rip something out. Or hold something in.

Not a good sign.

He only does that thing with his chest, or taps his finger when he's upset and about to break something.

"Start talking, Breaker," I grate, the words scraping my throat raw. Patience has never been my strong suit, but the dark glint in his eyes makes me hesitant to snap at him. Breaker's control is hairline thin at the moment. One wrong move and he may detonate.

Ignoring me, he swipes his phone off the coffee table and taps the screen, sighs, then shoves his phone into his pocket.

I cross my arms, heat climbing my neck as he refuses to meet my gaze. "What happened?"

Be patient. Be nice.

He cuts a look my way. “Let’s just say Zane won’t be typing up contracts or playing video games anytime soon.”

I quirk a brow, sorting through the many layers of that statement. “What did he do?”

“Something that earned him a lesson.”

A lesson.

My cheeks puff as I exhale, pulse pounding in my head, doing my best to avoid an argument. It appears Breaker lost control, and I guess Zane suffered the consequences.

“Hands or arms?” I ask.

“Hand. Just one.”

Ice spreads through my veins. “Did he touch her?”

“He tried.” The two words contain a violence I recognize all too well, but he’s being vague, which means whatever happened was bad. Really bad. Enough that he doesn’t want to tell me.

He’s lucky I’m in a good mood.

“Explain ‘tried,’ Breaker.”

“Why are you here again?” he asks, glaring at me from across the coffee table, which now feels more like a barricade. “I don’t need you watching over me.”

I narrow my eyes, my chest tightening. Of course he’d think that I don’t trust him, and not that I’ve been counting heartbeats until I could see him again.

“This was the plan,” I say, swallowing the truth. “Remember?”

“The plan was for all of us to be here after Delilah was ready,” he snaps.

My molars grind together. “Yet, here you are,” I gesture to him. “Starting the mission before we’re ready.”

He huffs out a half laugh. “So you came to make sure I got it right.”

“Obviously that was a good move considering you’re going around breaking hands and keeping secrets,” I clap back.

His jaw pops as he digs out his phone and sits back down on the sofa, tapping at his screen again. When he shoves it in his pocket and sighs, my blood turns cold. When he squares his shoulders like he’s preparing, opening his mouth to speak, but stops himself, I know.

I just fucking *know*.

“Rune.” The name burns my throat raw.

Breaker nods, looking away. “And it’s my fault.”

The floor seems to shift beneath my feet. That day a week ago rushes to the forefront of my mind. Her face, scared but determined to be strong as she walked from the room and right back into the devil's hands. Right where we sent her.

Where *I* allowed her to go, knowing what Rune is capable of.

My brothers don’t know what I know.

What Clyde knows.

“He hurt her,” I state, my gut churning with tarry darkness. I swallow and look up at the ceiling, praying she’s okay. “How bad?”

Breaker doesn’t answer and I press my eyes closed, a faint, but chaotic noise building in my head.

Reaper.

Christ. This will break him in ways he can’t come back from.

We fucking did this. Fucking sent her back here and now…

“What did he do?” I ask, focusing back on Breaker. His eyes fall to his feet. I suck in a breath, the churning in my gut turning solid and heavy like heavy stones.

Molten rage floods my veins, scorching through me as violently as lava. My vision narrows to pinpricks of light. Images of the past scratch at my mind, threatening to destroy every ounce of reason. I’m at the door before I register moving. Breaker’s fingers dig into my bicep, spinning me around.

“Where are you going?” he asks. “You know damn well we can’t touch Rune.”

“I’m not going to Rune. I’m going to get our girl.”

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Chapter 11

Cora

"GET YOUR FUCKING ASS back in the house before I drag you in there."

I ignore Clyde as he tears down his pristine driveway after me. Keys clutched tight, I march toward his SUV. My sneaker catches on a raised stone paver and I stumble, my hand smacking down on the driver door to catch myself, shocked he's allowed an uneven stone to mar his perfect landscaping.

"You know there is no other choice," I say over my shoulder, pressing the button to unlock the doors. The beep makes my pulse spike. "Either you take me or I'm stealing your car."

"Goddammit, girl," Clyde bellows, his long legs closing the distance between us. "Now is not the time to test me."

I whirl around, slapping away his hand before he can grab me. We've wasted the entire morning hiding in separate rooms after we exhausted his stash of bullets. Doing *nothing*. We haven't made a plan. Haven't talked beyond his cryptic bullshit about killing Rune.

The only thing I know, thanks to Breaker, is that they plan to get close to Rune, posing as the Snyder Group, but even that's been delayed thanks to Breaker's fit of rage.

So, in the meantime, Reaper needs information. That is why I'm here.

"Now is the perfect time to keep me close to Rune," I say.

“Back inside, Cora.” Clyde points toward his stark white monstrosity of a house. His jaw twitches, veins bulging at his temple. “I didn’t just stop myself from murdering that bastard so you could run back to him.”

When he lunges for the keys, I twist away, tucking them behind my back. Growling out my response. “I have to go to him, Clyde! I work for him. He—”

“He hurts you!” His roar hits me like a physical blow. I stumble back, my back pressing to the car door. Clyde’s eyes go wide, then he squeezes them shut, chest heaving.“He fucking hurts you, Cora.”

I slump against the car, my chest concaving. I can’t imagine what he must be feeling. Betrayed. Scared. Delly and I are the two things he goes completely insane over. I lost count of how many times he’s beaten the crap out of some random man who tried to date Delly.

He turns away, staring at his perfect landscaping, his gaze locked on the birds of paradise and skinny palms lining the driveway, before looking back at me. That dangerous gleam I saw earlier returns and he grates out, “You will never be alone with him again.”

I keep my tone flat, my shoulders stiffening. “If Rune suspects anything’s different, you’re dead.”

Clyde’s head drops back, afternoon sunlight catching the silver threading through his black hair. He looks so tired. Exhausted and weighed down with this new knowledge.

“You don’t have to like this, but I have to stay in Rune’s good graces,” I say. “He’s already suspicious that the men turned me against him. I need him to trust me. Reaper needs me close to him so I can—”

“Reaper?” His head snaps back down. “You’re fucking kidding?”

“No,” I say, placing my hands on my hips, the keys digging into my side. “You know damn well I’m the only one who can get access to anything Rune might have.”

His laugh is bitter. “Did you forget who’s been feeding Reaper intel for years?”

“Precisely.” I wrench the car door open. “All the more reason to keep his eyes off you and on me.”

Clyde’s fingers dig into my arm, yanking me backward. “You don’t know what he’s capable of, stupid girl.”

I snatch my arm away, my pulse jumps, becoming erratic and my cheeks heat.

How dare he? After finding me raped and battered on my floor, he really thinks I haven't experienced Rune at his worst?

Stepping close, I get in his face, making sure he can see the fury in my eyes. "No?" I spit the word like venom, jabbing my finger into his chest. "I know exactly what Rune is capable of. I'm his punching bag, his fuck toy, his *property*."

"You stupid girl." Clyde's laugh is bitter, almost cruel. "Rune is worse than you could ever imagine."

"Worse than fucking me over his desk?" I hiss, the words sour in my mouth. "Worse than punching my face after he came in my mouth?"

Clyde shrinks back, blinking like he's been hit in the gut, not just from the heaviness of my words but from the level of anger that I've reached.

"Rune is a fucking nightmare I've lived with day in and day out," I say. "Tell me something I don't know."

"He's a sick monster, Cora. A *murderer.*"

"If only I could ask my mother about that," I snap. "Oh right, I can't. Because he killed her."

Clyde takes a step back, his dark eyes scanning my face.

"Stop looking so shocked," I say, climbing into the vehicle. I grab the handle, pulling the door shut but stop and say, "You have secrets, but so do I."

He grabs the car door before I can close it, glaring at me. I narrow my eyes at him, mimicking his suspicious stare.

He drops his hand. "Zane told Breaker about your little deal."

Of course, he did. Zane probably started crying the second Breaker showed up.

"My deal with Zane saved my ass," I say. "At least I did something to stop the arrangement, unlike you."

Low blow on my part, and it hits its mark. Clyde winces, then lets out a heavy sigh. "Do you know what your mother did?"

"Do you?" I ask.

His jaw tightens, and he looks down at his feet. My heart sinks. Of course Clyde knows what my mother did. He may have been the one to kill her on Rune's order.

"Fine," he rumbles, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I'll take you to Rune. You can get your fucking intel for Reaper so you can report back to

that psycho—”

“Don’t you dare say anything about him.” I lean forward, pointing in his face. “He is not the enemy.”

His jaw tightens, lips thinning like he’s holding back everything he really wants to say, then grips my arm and yanks me out of the car.

“Get in the passenger seat,” he says. “You’re a shit driver, so I’m taking the wheel.”

He climbs in and slams the door. I stalk over to the passenger side and climb in, slamming the door a tad too hard.

He glares at me, then jabs at the button to start the engine and throws the car into drive. “Don’t think for a minute he won’t sacrifice you to save himself because he will.”

Keeping my focus on the gates ahead, I wonder if he means Reaper or Rune.

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Clyde keeps his eyes on the rearview more than the road, making me think I’m actually the better driver.

“The road is in front of us,” I point out, checking my seat belt for the fifth time. “Whiplash isn’t on my to-do-list so please don’t rear-end the car in front of us.”

Clyde glances at the road, then back to the rearview. “We’re being followed.”

My pulse jumps, and I twist in my seat, scanning the sea of cars behind us. “Which one?”

“The Ferrari,” he says.

“We live in Miami, Clyde,” I say, exasperated. “That narrows it down to half the cars in this city.”

“The *Purosangue*.”

“Please be more vague. I love it,” I say.

Clyde casts me a dry look. “All black. Three cars back. Center lane.”

I scan the lanes again and my stomach drops when I spot it. “Rune?”

“Not sure,” he says, cutting into the center lane. “Wouldn’t surprise me. Especially after…”

He doesn’t finish the sentence. He doesn’t have to.

“But I don’t think so,” Clyde says after a minute. “Like you said, he’s too paranoid to hire an outsider. Especially on short notice.”

“Zane?” I ask, because yeah, I have that man to deal with too and I wouldn't put it past him to have us followed.

“Fuck.” Clyde inches his car between the two in the next lane. Horns blast around us. “That’s entirely possible.”

“Do tails usually drive such conspicuous cars?” I ask, looking over my shoulder out the back window. “You’d think they’d want to be a bit more discreet.”

“You’d think,” Clyde says, leaning forward to show his middle finger to the car next to us as the driver leans on his horn. “So I’m going to find out.”

“Road rage is a thing,” I remind him as he forces our vehicle into his lane.

Clyde flips off another driver who blares his horn at us. My stomach knots as he steers us into the next lane, then suddenly swerves, barely catching the exit. My stomach dips, and I twist and watch as the Ferrari zooms past, missing the ramp.

“Well, you lost them,” I mutter, settling back in my seat as he drives into the heart of downtown, where the interstate and crossroads thread through the city like a spiderweb. Clyde steers us west, away from Rune’s house, and I glance his way. “Where are we going?”

“Toward the next exit,” Clyde says, cutting onto a street that weaves along the river snaking through the city. “I want to talk to this motherfucker.”

“Lovely,” I say, shifting in my seat. “I’ve always wanted to interrogate someone.”

My shoulder hits the door as Clyde takes another sharp turn, and drives us down a road lined with several skyscrapers in various states of construction, jutting up between small buildings. Many are just hollow concrete shells with exposed rebar reminding me of skeletons.

Clyde takes another turn, too fast, and I slam into the door again. My heart picks up pace, but I take a deep breath to ease the tension in my muscles. His tense jaw and rigid posture make me nervous. Not that I’ve never seen Clyde furious, but I’ve never witnessed him in action. Knowing Clyde kills people, and seeing it are two different things. Ever since I

watched Reaper shoot Manuel, I would like to avoid being present during a murder.

And right now Clyde looks murderous.

"And what means of interrogation are we going to use?" I ask, pressing the lock button on the door. "Waterboarding? Or maybe–"

As Clyde takes the next turn, the roar of the engine hits my ears before I see it. Tires squeal as the same black car from the interstate tears around the corner, fishtailing before it rights itself in the lane in front of us. Clyde curses and slams on the brakes. I lurch forward, the seat belt digging into my collarbone as he puts the SUV into reverse. Cars behind us blare their horns. Clyde twists in his seat, using my headrest to look over his shoulder, and my stomach drops as we fly backward.

"Move, goddammit!" he shouts. "Get the fuck out of my way!"

More cars honk, their blasting horns making my heart race. My scream gets lodged in my throat as the Ferrari speeds down the street, weaving between cars and lanes with precision.

Clyde jerks the wheel, narrowly missing a sedan. "Move!" he barks, whipping us backward into a construction site lot. He whips the SUV around, and my brain jostles, concrete dust billowing in a gray cloud behind us as he slams the car into drive and hits the gas. The tires scream, rocks spitting out, as they fight for purchase, then we shoot forward. I grab the dashboard, looking behind us, my blood rushing to my head, as the Ferrari flies into the lot behind us. The engine revs then it speeds forward.

"*Clyde*," I say, dragging out his name as I watch in horror as the car closes the distance.

"Hush," he hisses, yanking the wheel to round the large building. He stomps on the brake, and I pitch forward. His arm lashes out and catches me just as my seatbelt digs into my chest, keeping me locked in place.

My scream rips free. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Stay here!" Clyde shoves the door open, drawing his gun from the holster at his back just as the black car slams on its brakes, circling us and stopping abruptly, bumper to bumper.

"Clyde," I say, keeping my eyes on the car. "What is happening?"

"Stay put, Cora!" he screams at me, his eyes locked on the sleek car, gun aimed, finger on the trigger. He sidesteps, moving away from the SUV.

My chest heaves, and I grip my seat belt, shrinking down in my seat. I may be accustomed to Rune and violence, but *holy shit*, I've never been in

a fucking *car* chase.

"Step out carefully," Clyde snarls. "I have no problem unloading my clip into your head if you so much as blink too fast."

The passenger door swings open. A hand reaches out and grips the doorframe. His bald head and stormy eyes come into view, and a knot forms in my stomach.

Clyde lowers the gun. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Breaker?"

I exhale as I unbuckle then slam the door open, and tumble onto the asphalt, gaze pinned on him across the hood of the cars.

Breaker's winter gaze locks on me and I grip the doorframe to stay upright. Something dark, angry, and volatile flashes over his features.

"Little Red," he says.

That's all he says.

"You scared the shit out of me." Clyde shoves his pistol back in his holster. "Why are you driving like a lunatic?"

"You know I have no control over him," Breaker says, his voice deadly calm.

My stomach drops.

Wait.

He's not the one driving.

The driver's side door opens, and a black leather combat boot hits the pavement. My heart leaps into my throat. One large, fair-skinned hand slaps down on the top of the car door and a head with wavy auburn hair pops up, followed by massive shoulders and chest wrapped in a black t-shirt. He leans his forearm on the roof of the car, a smile cutting across his face.

My heart stutters.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

"Oh, good." Clyde snorts. "Another one of you assholes to contend with."

"That was the plan all along," Breaker says. "Several assholes to contend with."

I don't hear Clyde's response. All I can focus on is *him*.

My chin quivers. I swipe at my cheeks with both hands, unable to control the trembling in my shoulders.

He's here.

He came.

Like he promised.

“Hey, pretty Vixen,” Viper says, a feral smirk playing on his lips. That grin turns hard as he steps back and swings open the little back door, then gestures to the interior of the car. Somehow, he looks bigger with his mask off. Meaner. Sexier. “Get in the car. *Now*.”

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Chapter 12

Viper

1 Year Ago, December 12th

COLD AIR BLASTS THROUGH the vents, barely combating the heat in the small interior of the van. I'll never get used to how blazing hot it is in this part of the world. How sticky and gross the air feels, even in mid-December. Sitting in our surveillance van makes it worse. It's muggy and uncomfortable, even with the AC running.

"Fuck, it's hot today," Striker says from the driver's seat. He fiddles with the controls and the AC cranks up, but then the van door slides open and a blast of warm, humid air sucks all the cool air out the door. Brilliant daylight slices through the dark interior but cuts off as Breaker climbs in, removing his hat and slamming the van door closed behind him.

"We need to move." He drops into the single chair in front of the row of small monitors we use to track Rune and the girls, the blue lights highlighting his jawline. With a grunt, he tosses his hat aside, and props his

brown leather boot on the bench next to me where I'm sitting with Reaper at the back of the van. "Even with the company logo on the side, we stick out like a sore thumb."

My lip curls into a scowl at the boot, and I shove it away, tugging at the collar of my t-shirt. We're all dressed the same. Gray shirts with the same electrical company logo, jeans, and work boots. Our cover, and a reason to sit outside the small building on a busy Thursday afternoon.

Breaker leans sideways and taps Striker's chair. "Turn up the AC, Strike. It's stifling in this fucking van."

"No shit," I snap, stretching my legs out, but it flattens my thigh to Reaper, whose elbow drives into my side. I catch his glare but ignore it.

He chose to sit next to me. It's not my fault we're crammed together on the bench.

"Doesn't exactly feel like Christmas is just under two weeks away," Striker says. He turns the dial up all the way, and I lean forward, debating sitting in the empty passenger seat, but eye the row of cameras. The little camera on the top of the van is currently aimed on the front door. If I sit up front, I won't see them leave the building.

Probably why Reaper is flattened to my side. So he can watch them too, though he'd never admit it.

"And what is Christmas supposed to feel like?" Reaper asks, shifting to put space between us.

The van is too small. Especially now with all four of us crammed in here.

"Cold weather. Snow," Striker says, twisting in his seat to look at him. "Hot chocolate and sugar cookies." He shrugs. "All warm and fuzzy. Like puppies."

The chuckle that slips out of Reaper makes my brow lift. I glance at him squeezed next to me and catch his dark eyes.

"What?" he asks. His gaze drops to where our hips press together, glaring like it's my fault we're touching. He motions to my face. "Stop looking at me with that fucking face."

"With what face?" I grin. "Besides, I can't help it. I was born with this face. December 12th, thirty-one years ago. *Today*."

Reaper spreads his thighs, which does nothing but press us together more, as he leans back against the van and crosses his arms, making a sound in his throat. He lifts his chin toward Breaker. "Give it to him."

Breaker reaches into the cooler where we store drinks and snacks and pulls out a small box. He tosses it my way, and it lands in my lap. “Happy birthday.”

I eye the little box wrapped in a plaid ribbon sitting at an awkward angle, then pick it up and shake it, grinning at Breaker’s scowl. I read the label.

Fudge straight from Scotland.

“Fudge?” I ask and he shrugs.

They do this every year now, though I have no idea where it’s delivered. They must have a box at the post office I don’t know about.

Beside me, Reaper shifts, digging under the bench. Another box lands in my lap.

I glance over and find Reaper’s black eyes on me. I quirk a brow, holding up the box. “What the fuck is this?”

“That nasty, sweet cake shit you like,” he says, eyes traveling to the row of screens showing footage of Rune’s house and the entrance to the girls’ condos, alongside the live feed streaming in from the camera on the van.

But the two women we’ve been keeping tabs on for the last three years aren’t at home, or Rune’s, or even the office.

They’re in the restaurant across the street.

I pick up the box and examine the label, then look up at Reaper and scoff. “You bought me *petit fours*?”

He shrugs, not taking his eyes off the monitors.

A laugh builds in my throat, and I try to swallow it down. The man has never given me anything other than scowls and headaches and more issues. My loud cackle breaks free, making his eyes dart my way briefly before centering back on the screens.

He grinds his teeth. “Don’t make me regret it, Viper.”

“Aww, my big brother *loves* me,” I chuckle, nudging his side, and leaning into him so he’s smashed against the side of the van. “Makes me feel all warm and gooey inside.”

He grimaces. “Don’t say it like that.”

I lean back and open the top of the box, then pop a little cake into my mouth, chewing loudly. “Mmm, *brother*,” I murmur, grinning at his frown. “That’s so tasty. So *sweet*.”

“Fuck you.” Reaper leans over me and adjusts a monitor, refusing to look my way.

Not that I blame him. Calling each other brother feels taboo considering what we’ve all done around one another. To each other. I glance at Breaker and catch his wink. The urge to punch his smug face makes mine heat.

I hate it when he does that. Acknowledges what this thing between us has become. Especially around Strike and Reap. What we do when we share a woman is never spoken of afterward. We just kind of wake up the next day and go about our business. But sharing a woman is one thing. Breaker shoving his cock down my throat while our brother’s watch is another.

It’s like we all become possessed with a dark need to own one another in those moments. I wonder what Hunter would think. If he’d think us sick.

Who am I kidding? He’d have loved to have had the opportunity to get his hands on Striker.

But we haven’t done that for many, many months.

A year, to be exact.

And we don’t talk about why, even though they are both only a hundred yards away, enjoying lunch at their favorite restaurant.

“You’re over-analyzing it,” Reaper says like he can read my thoughts. “I only got that shit because you’re in a good mood when your mouth is full of sweets.”

I kick his calf, and the look he shoots my way would shrivel a cactus.

“Or pussy,” Striker says as he reaches into a bag in the passenger seat and tosses another box my way. It lands just shy of my boot, and I snatch it up from the van floor.

“More fudge?” I ask, examining the plaid-striped box. I turn it, inspecting the label, and see the same company in Scotland that Breaker used.

They started it a few years ago, after that trip to the orphanage, always giving me some item made in my homeland. Last year I got pens. The year before, a wool sweater and socks. This year it appears I’m getting sweets. I wonder if they do it because their heritage was taken, and I’m the only one who remembers my past, so they give me little bits of who I was before Fallon.

Reaper remembers who he was, the entire eight years of his life before I first saw him at the school. But he'd sooner slit our throats than allow us to celebrate where he came from. Hunter never told us either. It was a topic both men avoided. Not that I blame them.

"Speaking of sweet things," Breaker says, leaning forward and propping his forearms on his knees, eyes fixed on the screen. "There they are."

Every time I lay eyes on them, a strange pain twinges in my chest, right under my ribcage. It's almost violent in how jarring it feels. Like being hit in my heart with an icepick before it pries me open.

It's not exactly pleasant with how exposed it leaves me.

But it's not unpleasant either.

I also refuse to name what it is, because if I do, what we're doing, this planning, this awful fucking scheme to take this innocent woman and turn her into a weapon, is flat out sick. Cruel and surely will send us to hell.

"I need to piss," I say, and drop my gifts in Reaper's lap, then shove between Breaker and the van wall.

"Get back here," Reaper grates, grabbing my belt loop, but I slide the van door open and yank free.

My boots hit the sidewalk with a loud thud and a woman walking by stumbles as she stares at me. I slam the van door shut, catching Reaper's furious expression, and effectively muffling his threat of shoving small cakes down my throat until I choke. I take off across the street, my heart skipping with each step.

The target and her best friend walk east, chatting, oblivious to the chaos of tourists and locals swarming around them. Two security details, Rune's shitty soldiers, follow behind them, eyes all over the place, but they don't see me weaving between cars then blending into the mass of bodies behind them. I keep my focus on the two guards, assessing how they move, how completely fucking oblivious they are to the deadly weapon walking a few feet behind them.

I could take them both out within minutes, grab the woman they are paid to protect and be out of here before anyone realizes what is happening.

But that would defeat the entire purpose of the mission. Besides, the urge to snatch her up, take her to the estate and watch her writhe in pleasure beneath me, is a problem. And it doesn't just rest with her. I'd love to get

my hands on the sexy little redhead that we've watched just as long and just as intently as our target.

Stepping slightly to the side, I focus on the girls. They both wear tight jeans hugging perfect asses. Both in cute little shirts showing off their petite frames and sneakers on tiny feet. For them, it's another weekday. Just Rune's two accountants out for a day of shopping before Christmas.

For me, it's a heart-thundering risk to be so close to them.

If only I could get close enough to smell them. See their eyes up close. Feel the soft texture of their hair.

Right now, I'm defying the direct order to keep our distance and stay well away from them. To wait, wait, *wait* until the timing is right.

Delilah stops suddenly, dragging Cora by her wrist into a store. My throat tightens, heart beating rapidly, as the two guards take up position on either side of the door.

Fucking idiots didn't even go inside.

I debate it for all of three seconds and charge past them, my eyes on my boots. Cold AC blasts across my face, and I mutter in relief as it brushes my skin, then pause just inside the entrance when I spot the girls looking at a rack of clothes.

Delilah pulls out a shiny black dress, holding it up against her body. The enormous diamond on her finger flashes garishly under the store lights. My stomach clenches oddly at the sight of it.

Fucking Dave Sobian. The sack of shit asked our target to marry him earlier this year. How the sick bastard convinced her he was worthy of her is beyond me, but every time I think about it, my gut twists, green thorny vines slicing up my insides.

She's Rune's daughter.

His blood.

Our revenge.

The reminder I tell myself more and more every day doesn't settle as convincingly as it did years ago when we all sat down to review the plan.

It doesn't settle well at all.

It leaves a cut-up feeling in my chest, and the more I repeat it, the less appetizing our plot looks.

She looks appetizing. Sweet and delicate.

Innocent.

They both are.

“Look at this one,” Cora says, her honeyed voice slipping over me warm and smooth. She holds up a slinky little dress that would barely conceal her curves.

My teeth gnash together, and I realize I’m in the middle of the store, staring like an untrained soldier. Like I haven’t spent years tracking a target unseen. I step aside and pretend to look at a display case of sunglasses and those little wallets with the wrist strap women carry all their stuff in.

From the corner of my eye, I watch as Delilah trails a hand over the shiny blue material. “You should wear it to dinner tomorrow.”

The image of the sexy little vixen wearing that dress out in public burns my insides. Just the idea of men looking at her sprouts another thorn of jealousy. Because they would. Look and desire and hit on her. She would likely take a man home in that dress. Then they would see her slip it off. See her pale flesh and all those little freckles. Sink their teeth into the delicate skin along her collarbone.

The image of my teeth nipping at her jaw, then Breaker’s, then Striker’s, as Reaper sucks at her bottom lip, nearly takes my breath away.

Shit.

I need to get a grip on myself.

“Can I help you, sir?” A female voice slams into my thoughts. I look up and see a small woman with brown hair pulled into a severe ponytail, leaning over the counter, eyeing me. “Are you looking for something in particular?”

I glance around at all the dresses and shiny little tops and those tight leggings Delilah always wears when she meets Cora for a walk in the park. Panic eats at my chest at how out of place I am.

“Just looking,” I say. My voice draws Cora’s attention, but thankfully Delilah tugs at her again and they move deeper into the store.

Fuck, I’m an idiot. This was reckless.

I give the clerk a wink and back out of the store, breezing past the two security guards, then stalk down the street.

They should be put down for how easily I accessed the women. They’ve become negligent in their duties. Rune has gotten careless over the years as well. Too confident.

The asshole thinks he’s untouchable.

I wish I could see the sick bastard's expression when he realizes what we’ve done.

Looking both ways, I dart between cars and step up onto the sidewalk. When I shift my focus back toward where we parked, I spot him. I shake my head at the fucker's hypocrisy. With his legs sprawled out in that arrogant, sexy way, hair shimmering onyx in the daylight, anyone within a hundred yards can't help but look at him. Even in jeans and a dirt-smeared T-shirt, he's so incredibly handsome it should be illegal.

He lifts a hand and waves, then pops something in his mouth and chews. My eyes drop to his lap, and I see the little box.

When I reach him, I snatch up the *petit fours* from his lap and glare at him. "Why the fuck are you out here? Someone could see you."

"And someone could see you," he says, eyes locked on the storefront down the street.

"Yeah, but"—I gesture to his face—"that mug of yours is pretty distinct."

He points to himself. "This face?" he smirks. "I can't help it. I was born with this face."

My retort dies on my lips when the two women step out of the store and head back this way. From this distance, I can make out their features, and my chest does that stabbing thing again. Reaper shifts, leaning forward and propping his forearms on his thighs.

"We're just training her, right? Not touching?" I ask. "And *just* Delilah?"

They pass us, guards at their backs, completely unaware of the predators watching them from across the street. When they disappear into another store, I glance at Reaper.

He drops his head and leans back on the bench, crossing his arms but doesn't answer my question.

We can look, but we can't touch.

Except not touching feels harder and harder with each passing hour.

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Chapter 13

Viper

SHE DOESN'T FIGHT ME as I drag her through the bay doors. She remains silent, just like she did the entire drive here. Our strong girl, the one I watched walk with her head held high back into the hands of our enemies, said nothing. She just swiped at those fucking tears that won't stop. Each one that slides down her cheek drives another splinter into my chest.

She's still trying to be brave. After everything he did. All those years and years and fucking years.

After all *we've* done to her. The secrets and lies and promises we had no right to make.

At some point she's going to explode. Completely deconstruct and fall apart. I only hope that when she does, her rage explodes outward instead of swallowing her whole.

Behind us, Breaker closes the door, the metal rattling loudly through the room. I glare at him, barely registering Cora's fingers clawing at my grip. His confession burns through me every time I think about it. Even though I want to throttle him for being so careless, I don't. His guilt is punishment enough. And I know it's not his fault. Not really. He acted out the same way I would have.

No. What Breaker did was tame. I would have acted on impulse and rage and the desire to avenge her after that asshole, Zane, insulted her.

Put his *hands* on her.

A writhing destructiveness courses through my veins and I can't seem to gather any self control. The second she started crying, a dull, throbbing noise started in my head, and I lost the ability to breathe. Think. All I hear is that noise. The same constant, awful, hideous sound that takes me back to that clearing. It pushes my mind back further to that dark room, and I can't seem to get my head together. To make it stop. To make *myself* stop. Tame this hideous feeling inside me, because I know Rune hurt her.

Again.

Hurt her in more ways than she admitted to Breaker.

And she went right back to him.

My heart splinters beneath my ribs. I clutch my chest, wishing I didn't understand why she went to Rune.

The thrumming noise in my head grows louder. Screams.

Cora jerks, trying to free herself from my grasp. I stop in the center of the room, taking a deep breath to calm myself. But it doesn't help. Breaker moves forward, his jaw granite-hard, eyes glacial. That deadly look is aimed at me. I'm being too rough with her. I know I am, but I can't seem to let her go.

He reaches for her, trying to take her from me, and I shove him back. He stumbles, grinding out something, a threat maybe. I don't know, and I don't fucking care. There's too much chaos in my head. Every word is just meaningless syllables, each one drowning in the chaotic roar in my head. My vision blurs, my chest squeezing, crushing my lungs.

Cora yanks out of my grasp. I lurch for her, but pause mid-step the second my eyes land on the purple bruise and the lump on her forehead. That primal need to ruin claws at my insides, trying to rip free.

"He knows it was one of you," she says, but it's like we're in a tunnel, her voice distant and echoing. She backs away, almost in slow motion, and points at Breaker. "Zane is going to lose his mind when he recovers."

"Let him," Breaker says, voice dripping with violence. "So I can fucking ruin him."

An exasperated sound catches in her throat. Her eyes dart around like a trapped animal, before locking on the bathroom door. As she bolts, I lunge after her, but Breaker grabs my arm. I whirl, muscles coiled and ready to strike.

"Calm down," he grates. "You're scaring her."

My teeth gnash together as she disappears into the bathroom. I take a deep breath, knowing I probably look like a maniac. And that's the last thing she needs right now. More violence and rage anywhere near her. None of this is her fault.

It's ours. All of it.

Fucking Reaper.

He counted on this. Breaker leaving, me following. The control freak must have thought that between the two of us, we'd be able to keep her safe.

How? How the fuck are we supposed to keep a delicate jewel from being crushed under Rune's power? How do we protect her from his sick games and twisted mind?

I just want her home. Safe. Away from this sick place. Walking through the garden, picking mint leaves, turning her face to the sun, letting it wash away the years of shit she's endured.

Let her have peace.

All of us just need some fucking *peace*.

I rake my fingers through my hair, the throbbing in my head growing louder, so I barely hear the bay door sliding up. It's not until I spot Harlow, dipping under the door that my focus snaps with precision onto him.

"You can't just pop up like that, drawing attention to us!" His scream is loud enough that it breaks through the noise in my skull. He stalks my way, finger pointed at me. "You're going to ruin years of planning."

He's worried about the plan? Now?

"Fuck the plan," I growl. "He needs to die."

"You know that's not an option," Breaker says. "We need to get into that compound. We need to get—"

"Fuck. The. Plan." I shove past him, focusing on the bathroom door.

"Give her space," Breaker barks out, and I freeze.

Slowly, I turn back to face him. Whatever he sees in my expression makes him straighten, like he's preparing to take me on.

"Give her a minute," Breaker says. He motions to my face. "You're a lot, Vipe. Give her space to think."

I shake my head, disbelief tumbling from my lips with a huff of air. "Space?" I ask. "You mean like the space we gave her that allowed Rune to move in and what, Breaker? What exactly did he do?"

He closes his eyes, his chin dropping to his chest.

“That’s what I thought.”

Harlow lunges, grabbing the collar of my shirt with one hand, the other cocked back. His fist grazes my jaw as I twist away, my shirt stretching in his grip. I catch his next punch mid-air. The impact jolts up my arm, and I shove him back hard enough to send him staggering.

The veins in his neck bulge, eyes wild and burning with an intensity that could level a city as he screams, “You fucking knew? You knew Rune was hurting her?”

Another punch comes flying, faster than I expected, but I block it, a little taken aback at how fast he is. How skilled. Though I shouldn’t be surprised considering what I know about him.

“Watch it, old man,” I snarl, gripping his fist and shoving it away. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

His rage collapses, his eyes hollowing. The anguish making his shoulders slump would affect someone who gave a fuck, but I don’t. I don’t care about his fucking feelings. I care about our girl.

“Don’t act like you didn’t know,” I snarl, jabbing a finger into his chest. Into the fucking suit he always wears that reminds me of Fallon. “Don’t act like you didn’t turn a blind eye to everything Rune has done over the years. Don’t act like you feed Fallon info for any other reason than to assuage your guilt for what you *allowed*.”

Harlow pins me with a glare. “I didn’t know.”

“Which part?” I say, malice icing my tone. “And which woman did you fail to protect? Pick one.”

My words hit him so hard he takes a step back.

I dig in deeper, wanting him to hurt, needing him to feel as much agony as our girl. “You’ve ignored what Rune has done for years. Pretended it didn’t happen even when you saw for yourself what he does when he thinks no one is watching.”

“I didn’t know what he planned,” he grinds out. “And I certainly never knew about Cora.”

“But you suspected.” I shove past him, heading for the door.

Give her space. Fuck that. She doesn’t need space. She needs people who care.

I’m going to have to do.

The second my palms hit the metal door, I freeze. The memory slams into me like a brick to my chest. I close my eyes, breathing. Focusing.

Trying to rid myself of the image that suddenly occupies every corner of my mind.

I roll my shoulders, unease creeping up my spine as I walk into the room. Water drips from the shower head, hitting the tile with a shallow, echoing *plink*. I grind my teeth, refusing to let my mind take me back there, and move further into the room. When I see her, I stop, breath rushing from my lungs.

Cora sits, her back to the far wall, eyes closed, head tilted back against the tile, her arms wrapped around her middle like she's holding herself together. She must not hear me because she doesn't move as I walk toward her.

Her fiery hair escaped her ponytail, the pretty ringlets framing her face. The too-bright light overhead washes out her skin, making all the little freckles on her nose and cheeks stand out. My throat closes at the sight of her. She's so tiny and delicate.

So fucking beautiful, it wrecks me.

I remind myself to move slowly, to be gentle. But that's not what I needed. I needed wrath and ruin and someone to make the monsters hidden in plain sight bleed.

Right now, Cora needs strength and fucking vengeance.

And I need to know she's okay.

My footsteps echo as I stalk toward her, and her eyes pop open. She tracks me as I approach, her face devoid of all emotion. I grip her arm, pulling her to her feet, more roughly than I intended, and her lips part. Her eyes grow wide as I grip her long-sleeved button-up shirt and yank it off, tossing it to the floor. I scan her wrists and arms, lifting them above her head to see every inch. When my eyes land on the faint bruise and the remnants of stitches, the world turns a blurry red.

It was removed. Cut out of her.

For *Zane*.

My pulse hammers against my skull, drowning out everything but the roar of blood in my ears. Before I know it, I've yanked her tank top over her head. The faint bruise in the shape of teeth on her breast shreds every ounce of control. I pull her toward me, trailing my fingers over her stomach, searching for more evidence of abuse, then spin her to examine her back. When I see none, I let her go.

She stumbles back into the wall. Something flickers across her face, maybe fear, but it fades when our eyes lock. I step closer, the need to feel her making me move on instinct. I run my hands over her shoulders, down her arms, my thumb moving over the stitches. Glide my fingertips over her belly and lower back and ass, then around to between her thighs.

She makes a small sound as I cup her over her jeans. There's a primal urge to shove my hand under the denim and drive my fingers into her. Feel her warmth wrapped around me. Bend her over to reclaim what he touched. Instead, I keep my touch gentle, soft. Just letting my hand rest softly against the place that's been used to control her.

After a minute, my heartbeat finally slows. The unease swirling through me settles now that I have my hands on her. I step back, and she presses her back to the wall, her gaze dragging all over me.

At least she's stopped crying, thank fuck.

Cora reaches for me, hesitantly, then traces the line of my nose, slowing to feel the slight bump from where it was broken when I was a kid. Her tongue darts across her lower lip, drawing my eyes to the delicate flesh, and something in my chest tightens. The finger on my nose ghosts over my cheek like she's counting each freckle or outlining my cheekbone underneath, before trailing to my jaw, then up to my ear, and finally to my hair, feeling the strands between her fingers.

I freeze, barely breathing as she studies me, watching as her eyes home in on certain parts of my face—the moles on my cheeks, the furrow between my brow. My lips. The deep set of my eyes. When she brushes my lashes, my eyes flutter closed, her touch unwinding something coiled inside me.

When she drops her hand, I open my eyes, and find her gaze locked on me. It's difficult to decipher her expression. It's scarily blank.

Until it's not.

Rage cracks her emotionless mask. Her spine straightens and her hand flies out. Pain explodes across my face.

Shit, that hurt.

I wince when her hand makes contact with my cheek again, her fingers catching the bridge of my nose, making my eyes sting.

"I deserved that," I tell her, rubbing my cheek.

"You and Reaper knew," she says, her voice deadly calm. "You both knew I was promised to Zane and said nothing."

“Our hands were tied,” I say. “There was nothing we could do. Reaper trusted you’d find a way out of it because we couldn’t, little Vixen.”

“Reaper,” she grumbles his name like a curse, then meets my eye. “When is Delly coming back? Rune mentioned trying to negotiate a price with your father.”

Shit. I’m not sure how much she knows, so I keep my answer vague. “Our girl is still back home, training and—”

“Training?” she asks, cutting me off. “Training for what?”

Okay, so she doesn’t know much.

“That will come later,” I say. Her emerald eyes glimmer with anger at my lack of response, and I can practically see her sassy retort forming as her pouty lips pull into a frown.

I smile at her ferocious rage. This woman. She’s fire and passion and pure female power.

“Why the fuck are you smiling?” she snaps.

“You’re beautiful when you’re angry.” I reach for a red curl, but she slaps my hand away.

“And you’re…” Her voice trails off as she settles back against the wall, her emerald eyes moving from my face to my chest. “Not too bad looking yourself.”

My grin widens. “I’ve been told I’m quite striking.”

Her features flatten, her pretty mouth turned down in a scowl. “I wouldn’t go that far. But I’m willing to settle on saying that you’re pretty.”

“I’ll take it.” I grin. “Though I’m going to continue to tell myself I’m the latter.”

She makes a sound that could pass as a laugh, then looks down at her hands, her fingers twisting together. “They told you,” she says quietly. “About Rune. That’s why you came.”

“No, Vixen.” I crowd her space, my finger hooking under her chin, forcing her eyes back to mine. “I came because I missed that sassy mouth of yours.”

Her lips twitch, then flatten. She tucks a curl behind her ear, trying to step away, but I move with her, keeping her against the wall, refusing to let her avoid this. I dip my head, inhaling her scent. Sweet, innocent, floral. Purely her. My lips brush the shell of her ear, and the shiver that races through her slight frame hits me like a drug.

“Your secret is safe,” I whisper against her skin. “But the second we’re alone, I’m going to cover every single inch of your skin with my kisses to remind you who you belong to.”

She turns, our noses brushing, gazes colliding. This close, her eyes look so vibrantly green, flecked with gold, like a precious stone. Something dark flashes in them, something I know too well.

“What Rune did is not your fault,” I tell her.

“No shit,” she snaps, shoving me back. A tear escapes, and she wipes at it, angry again. Maybe at me, maybe out of pure humiliation that I know her secret. Maybe at her lack of control, possibly because of her entire fucking life.

I’m a nosy fucker, so I watched each video recording of the girls at night when I couldn’t sleep, devouring every moment of them together in their rooms, hungry for more. When I came to the footage of Striker with her, I slowed the recording and heard every brutal detail about her mother.

His too.

Breaker once said Caroline deserved what happened to her. I never agreed. Her death was vicious. No human deserves that level of depravity.

Until I heard what she did to our girl.

Cora has not had a single person outside of Clyde and Delilah care for her. Love her. Then we stepped in and took over, making promises we couldn’t keep. Just like everyone else in her life.

I want to tell her she’s not alone anymore. I’m here. Breaker is here. Soon, Striker and Reap, and Delilah, and we’ll all be together again. That Rune will be dead, and she can lay it all to rest, but it’s a lie.

Delilah isn’t ready.

And I have no idea if they’ll want us after they know the truth.

Cora grabs her tank top off the floor, pulling it over her head, then pulls her button up shirt over her shoulders, avoiding my eyes. She moves past me and right when she reaches the door, she turns to face me.

“Don’t tell him, okay?” she whispers. “Don’t tell Reaper what Rune did.”

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Chapter 19

Cora

I BRACE A HAND ON the back of Breaker's chair, trying to keep from collapsing. My head throbs with each heartbeat, no doubt from last night, lack of food, and sleep, but that's not the reason I feel unsteady.

It's him. Viper.

Or rather Vince. Vincent Campbell of the Snyder Group. Ben's associate and close friend.

"Vincent. Vince," I say the name, tasting it. It actually fits him. It's slightly rugged, masculine, and strong. Unyielding, yet weirdly gentle. "The name suits you."

He leans against the wall covered with the pictures and lists cataloging Delly and my life, arms crossed over his massive chest, boots locked at the ankle in a wholly arrogant way that is similar to Reaper but lined with a sensual edge. His face betrays nothing, but also reveals so much. I catch his smirk at my obvious staring, and I have to look away to gather my thoughts.

Breaker grasps my wrist and pulls me until I'm in front of him, then tugs me down onto his lap, tucking my ass against his belly. In the chair across from us, Clyde studies Breaker's every move as he positions me and wraps an arm around my waist. Like he's taking in the way he's touching me, examining how he grips my hips, adjusting me on his thick thigh. Assessing his ability to care for me. Deciding if he's worthy and capable of keeping me comfortable and safe.

Whatever he sees loosens his shoulders and I exhale, relaxing too. But it doesn't last long. I feel Viper's stare on the side of my face, as hot as flames.

I dare another look his way. He's not looked away from me since we gathered around the table in the loft with all the tech devices. The second our eyes lock, my belly flutters, little winged birds taking flight in a flurry of excitement.

I've had this man *inside* me. Pleasured him. *Tasted* him. Had his mouth on me. That thought, along with his entire *self*, has left me unbalanced.

Viper wasn't exaggerating.

He's striking.

Not in the way Breaker is, but in a way that's deceivingly gentle, almost boyish. Viper's handsome in a way that disarms. But there's an air about him. Like he's seen too much of this world. All the good and every single trace of the bad. Faint lines frame those vivid eyes, making his age impossible to pin down. He could be anywhere from his mid-twenties to late-thirties.

Breaker is so obviously young, and Striker, you can tell he's in his early thirties by the air around him that crackles with experience. Reaper is, well, Reaper is on a whole different level of beauty, but he's obviously the oldest. Each of them is so distinct, so maddeningly beautiful in their own ways, that I can't say I'm mad that they've decided we belong to them.

Ripping my eyes off his thick thighs, I clear my throat, trying to refocus. "Is Vincent your real name?"

"No," Viper says. "Vincent isn't my real name, but should we cross paths—"

"Which she will," Clyde adds in.

"—you must remember to call me Vince," Viper finishes, tearing his eyes from me long enough to shoot Clyde a warning glare for the interruption.

Viper is a fitting name too.

Like Striker, there's a sweetness to his face, but it vanishes the instant anger flares. Then the soft yet masculine features become more prominent, almost like something dark and violent is trying to emerge. It turns his high cheekbones sharp, his strong jaw severe, and the startling blue eyes that are already deep-set, darker, more intense, and menacing.

He’s fair-skinned like me, with a dusting of freckles on his hands and forearms, a few on his cheeks, along with some darker moles. There’s a hint of auburn stubble, matching his wavy, dark auburn hair. When the light hits it, each strand flashes with streaks of ember, making it look like it’s about to catch fire.

“I should have known you were a redhead,” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

One of his brows quirks, and Viper rubs at the thin bridge of his nose where it’s slightly crooked, which makes me realize I’m staring at him just as intently as he is me.

“Why is that, little Vixen?” Viper asks, his voice dropping, the question slipping out smooth like whiskey and dangerous as sin.

My pulse skitters. The air between us thickens, charged with something dangerous and electric that sets my veins on fire.

Does he even know? How highly sexual he is? Every quirk of a brow, every movement of his body oozes with a sensuality I noticed before, but somehow is more prominent now that I can see his full face.

He’s overwhelming.

They all are. This entire situation is too much.

The room seems to shrink in on me, my heart skipping and jumping. I brush Breaker’s arm away and stand, my skin suddenly too hot.

Inhaling a deep breath, I meet Viper’s eyes. “Because you’re a liar and you keep secrets.”

His lips curl into a grin that makes the air leave my lungs. “That makes two of us, pretty Vixen.”

Viper’s gaze drags up my body like he’s thinking of the promise he made in the bathroom. Kissing me everywhere. Claiming me yet again, so I remember I’m his. Theirs. When his eyes lock on mine again, my face heats, and I look away, deliberately looking at anything and everything but him. He’s too volatile.

Too knowing.

My jaw clenches against the shame trying to pierce my armor. The thought of Viper knowing what Rune did last night makes my chest tight, even though I know I did nothing wrong. Rune is the vile one. He should feel shame, not me. There is no shame in being a casualty of his rage.

It’s not my fault or theirs, even though a small part of me is furious they didn’t prepare me with the news about the marriage arrangement.

I flash on their father’s face. His silver-hair and those eyes like a frozen wasteland. The way he’d examined me like merchandise being returned. I know the men never would have sent me back, or put me in danger if they had a choice. Rune had made a deal. One that couldn’t be broken.

A deal I got myself out of at a hefty cost. Revealing what I know to Zane was a dangerous move. But showing my hand was my only option, and it worked.

For now.

Until he kills me to keep me quiet.

Like he can read my mind Viper says, “Is Zane going to be any more of a problem?”

My gaze darts to him. Yes. He’s talking to me.

I narrow my eyes, not liking how he seems to dissect me layer by layer. Like he’s seeing all my secrets. And just like him, I have many.

“No,” I say at the same moment Clyde says, “Yes.”

I shoot Clyde a look. “It’s taken care of.”

“Rune already knew about your mother’s parties,” Clyde snaps. “There wasn’t a person in their circle who didn’t know.”

“Oh,” I say, searching for anything else to use besides the truth, but come up empty. “I guess Zane didn’t know that.”

“He said he called it off,” Breaker says to Clyde. “Does it matter why?”

“The reason could affect the outcome.” Viper shifts again, drawing my eyes. The long lists of time logs and various images tacked to the wall behind him shift with him, and a single image of Delly draws my attention. It was taken from several yards away, zoomed in enough to see her face clearly. She’s on the steps of the courthouse with the lawyer she used to file for divorce from Dave a few months ago, wearing the black pantsuit I convinced her to buy.

I move forward until I’m in front of it, barely registering I’m right next to Viper so I can examine the picture.

She’s so beautiful. He was such a prick. I guess the rumors about him were true. Too bad it took a year of marriage for her to find out he’s just a sleaze like the rest of the men in Rune’s circle.

Viper tugs on my hair, grabbing my attention. My focus shifts to him. His entire body seems to flicker like a flame that’s either going to burst with

brightness, or snuff out and throw everything into darkness.

"You're really intense," I whisper. He always has been, and I'm not sure what's changed in the last week, but he's somehow bigger, more consuming of the air in the room. "Did you start taking steroids or something?"

That earns me a chuckle and a smile so wide that I blink in the brilliant flash of it, leaving me overexposed and too hot.

"And you, Cora Julian, are a force to reckon with," he says quietly. "And maybe a little too curious for your own good."

"How's that?" I keep my voice low, aware that Breaker and Clyde are across the room having a discussion of their own.

"Foxes are smart. Sneaky. They know how to hide." Viper runs the backs of his fingers along my jaw, sending sparks of light through my skin. "And they have keen senses that help them survive." He leans in close so I feel his breath on my ear. "And they have exceptional hearing."

I suck in a breath, images of the past flashing through my head like some fucked-up montage. My mother, Zane's face, my father. Zane kissing my mother as he entered the house.

Zane sitting in my parent's office, planning with my mother to wreck Rune's life.

"Gotcha, *madadh ruadh*," Viper says, watching my reaction. "Your secret may be deadlier than mine."

My face flushes.

He knows I'm lying.

He knows exactly what I'm keeping a secret.

But that's impossible. There is no way that Viper could know.

Only Zane knows what my mother did because he was the one who made the call. I didn't hear the words, but I knew what he was saying. He was ordering a hit to end Delilah's mother's life.

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Chapter 15

Striker

FORGIVENESS DOESN'T COME EASILY. It never has. Fallon always told me it was one of my best qualities outside of my aim. Once a person shows me who and what they are, I will remember it. And if they cross me, I'll keep my anger tucked neatly away, and never, ever let it go.

Father's betrayal weighs heavily, making my mind spin. I will forever feel the cold pistol pressed against my head as he threatened to kill me.

I've spent half my life knowing Fallon murdered the boys at the school he didn't think were fit, removing them one by one over the years, and somehow even knowing that my life was no more valuable than another's, I never considered he'd kill me. Any of us. We were his prized soldiers. The best.

The last left standing. As if that somehow made us exempt.

Except now we know we're not. Fallon's thirst for control and need to avenge Hunter's death outweighs any love he may have for us.

I rake my fingers through my hair, tugging it at the roots. A skittering unease crawls up my spine, my nerve endings like live wires. I glance out the window at the drive where Reaper and Fallon have been talking in private, while I'm trapped in the house with Father's new soldiers, pacing and losing my fucking mind.

Like I'm not a part of this nightmare. Like I didn't lose my brother, and spent years planning and watching alongside them.

Grinding my teeth, I slow my near-manic pace, and square my shoulders, dragging an assessing gaze along the line of ten soldiers Father brought with him. Other than their eyes and their size, they are all identical. Same masks, same all-black uniforms, and weapons. They line the foyer, blocking the front door.

And my exit.

The skin on my arms prick, and it takes everything in me not to scratch my nails down my forearms. I'm trapped in this fucking house, those old fears, winding me up tighter and tighter. As each minute ticks by, it's becoming harder and harder to keep my mind from sliding back to the darkness and that cold room.

Cold. Alone.

Terrified.

I glance over my shoulder toward the second floor, where I locked Delilah in her room. My jaw tightens, the image of Father taking the belt to her, cutting through me.

The memory may very well ruin me.

Her pain.

Her refusal to bend.

For us.

"Did you all really fuck her?" His nasally voice snaps me out of my thoughts. I turn to face him, my vision hazing red at the corners. My gaze locks with his brown eyes.

"Excuse me?" I ask, taking a step toward him, and tap the shiny black number on his black shirt. 57. That's his name. His number. I've never seen the full list of the men Fallon has gone through over the years, but I know it's over a hundred.

We were among his earliest attempts to train soldiers for hire. These are his last, and Fallon's tactics didn't change. If anything, these men have endured far worse than us. We at least received a smidgen of Fallon's good side.

They didn't, and it's left them cold and empty of all humanity.

And I really, really don't fucking like this one.

The fucker held a gun to my head.

I angle my head, staring into his shit-brown eyes. 57 shifts as I tap his number again. "Did you just speak out of turn?"

He lifts his chin toward the stairwell behind me. “She’s a hot piece of ass. I’d fuck her if I we—”

His words cut short as I grip his throat. The blurred halo around my eyes pulses scarlet, rage searing away all logical thoughts. Before I can think, I spin him, taking him down, my fist pulled back and aimed for his nose the second his head hits the wood floor.

“Enough.” Fallon’s sharp voice snaps through the foyer. The deadly tone snatches me out of my anger just enough that I unfurl my fist, but keep my knee to 57’s chest.

The front door slamming closed echoes in the foyer. Damp winter air blasts through the line of soldiers at my back. Cold fingers grip the back of my neck, and I stiffen.

“Mind yourself,” Father says.

My teeth grind. *Fuck* him. He ordered this piece of shit to shoot me last night. The humiliation still sears through me, a fresh wound, festering and bubbling below the surface of my skin.

“Release him,” Reaper says, tone like ice. My gaze snaps to him, and he gestures to 57. “He’s not worth it.”

Slowly, I unravel my fingers from his throat one by one, my eyes on his, daring him to make a move as I stand. 57 scrambles to his feet and moves back into his position, adjusting his mask around his neck.

“55,” Father barks, and a tall, thin man steps out of formation. “I want two guards posted at her door twenty-four hours a day.” He points to 57 and 55. “You two take the first shift. The rest of you set up in the west wing.”

“Not him,” I growl. “That sack of—”

“Silence,” Father says, cutting me off. His cold eyes bore through me, and I swear he *knows*. Not just my hatred for the soldier he ordered to restrain me, but how dangerous it is to post him outside her door.

“I don’t trust him,” I say.

“And I do not trust my sons,” Father barks. He points to me and then Reaper. “You two, prepare our meal. We can discuss trust issues over dinner.” When Reap doesn’t move, he gestures toward the back of the house. “Go. Now.”

Reaper tenses, his stormy gaze reminding me that I’m not the only one being humiliated. Put in place for defying our Father. He marches past

without a word. I roll my shoulders, loosening my anger, and follow him to the kitchen.

Without a word, Reaper stalks to the fridge and opens it, fingers drumming on the door. The bright white glow highlights his cheekbones, the line of his nose. Turns his black hair nearly blue. My heart aches at the sight, and I tug out a chair, a bit too aggressively, then sit.

Reaper slams the fridge door closed. “We have to keep ourselves in check,” he says. “Not react to him.”

“Are you reminding me or yourself?” I ask, watching as he moves around the kitchen, collecting items, knowing it’s pointless to help him. He won’t let me, or he’ll end up redoing everything I attempt to make.

“Both of us,” he grates, slamming a bag of potatoes on the counter.

I flash back to all the times he would help Cook prepare our meals. Viper too sometimes. I had always thought that Reaper’s obsession with ensuring our food was prepared well, that we all had enough, sometimes more than him, came from the fact we were always so hungry. That his deep fear of never having a full belly fueled his need for control, and the only way to have any at all was to make sure we were fed.

Now, over the years, I think it’s become something he just enjoys doing. Not that learning to prepare food with Cook made him good at it. But he kept us all fed after Fallon sent Cook back to the States, never bothering to replace him.

Watching Reaper now, searing meat in a pan, it’s obvious this is one of the few times he’s not enjoyed cooking.

“Are you going to tell me what you discussed with Fallon?” I ask, noting how his precise movements become jerky at my question.

“No,” he says, pushing up his sleeves to wash the potatoes in the old enamel sink.

“Did he tell you why he’s here?” I lean sideways, trying to read Reaper’s expression, but it tells me nothing. “He was only gone a few hours.”

“Maybe he missed us,” Reaper says.

“Sarcasm is a shitty self-defense mechanism, Reap.”

He keeps his back to me, angrily tossing chopped potatoes into a roasting pan. “So is slicing his throat. Be proud I’m choosing the less violent option.”

Rising from my seat, I move next to him, leaning against the counter, and crossing my arms. He meets my eye. It's impossible to miss the dark shadow that passes behind them before he looks away.

He's not just pissed; he's a caged dog, furious.

Terrified of what is going to happen next.

Exactly how I feel.

We both know what Fallon could do. What he may try to make us do.

Train her. Brutally.

"Have you heard from them?" I ask, lowering my voice.

Reaper shakes his head. "No."

I curse under my breath. It's been hours since Viper snuck off. He's in the SUV, which would slow him down with gas stops, but I'm sure he's there by now.

The rattling of the knife hitting the enamel sink crashes through the small kitchen. Reaper blows out a breath and props his hands on the edge of the counter, his knuckles turning white.

"He put a fucking gun to your head," he grates, closing his eyes. "He fucking hurt her."

I uncross my arms and shift, the memory assaulting my senses. Another zap of anger races through me.

That. That I will never forgive.

And neither will Reaper.

***

"She is impressive in her loyalty," Father says, taking another bite.

I track the movement of his hand as he delicately pierces another potato with his fork, his gaze fixed on Reaper across from me. Right now he's Father, sitting at the head of the table, making conversation. It doesn't matter that five soldiers block the dining room door, making this more like a hostage situation than a family dinner.

Fucked-up family that we are.

But this is how Father works. One minute he's instructing us as a father would, guiding us through life with wisdom and what might actually be genuine affection. The next, ordering us to attention and scrutinizing our every move.

"Maybe fucking the girl was the right move after all," he says.

The crassness of his words creates an acidic taste in my mouth. He's needling us, trying to shock us, make us uncomfortable so we react. But it won't work. Not anymore. Everything about him is grotesque and cruel and undeserving of our loyalty.

Reaper's cutting gaze makes Father smirk, a slick curve of his lips, I know all too well.

Fallon gestures to Reaper's untouched plate. "Not hungry, my son?"

Reaper's lips pull into the same cruel grin as he stabs at the now cold vegetables, his eyes dark and full of malice. "Ravenous." He takes a bite, eyes locked with Father's, and chews. Swallows. "Must be all the *fucking*."

I lower my head, trying not to smile. Fallon's fork clinks on his plate, and my heart skips a beat. When I raise my head, I find him watching me.

"Your brother is angry with me," he says flatly. Like the idea is simply too absurd to be upsetting. As if Reaper doesn't have a right to be angry that our father threatened to kill me and took a belt to our girl.

Reaper taps the table, drawing Father's attention back to him. "We had her right here, you know," he says, looking Fallon in the eye. "Right on this very table. Legs splayed. Begging for more while I watched my brothers eat her out."

Father raises an eyebrow. "The girl saw your face?"

"Nope," Reaper says, eyes locked with Father's.

He levels him with a cool glare. "So you blindfold the girl and then you all have your way with her?"

Reaper shrugs. "What can I say? You fucked us all up so bad we're kinky motherfuckers."

With a slight sigh, Father continues to eat. I shove a large bite in my mouth so I don't have to say a damn thing, waiting for this all to go downhill. Reaper can get away with acting defiantly, more than the rest of us, but even he's pushing Father a tad too hard.

"I'd like to see this," Fallon says after a thick silence.

I choke on the potato in my mouth, glancing at Reaper, and find he's glaring at Fallon with such hatred, I'm not sure how he hasn't caught fire.

"I know you have a deep affection for us, Father dear," Reaper says coldly, "but it seems inappropriate to watch your sons fuck our captive."

Father sets his fork and knife down, then dabs the cloth napkin to his mouth, each move meticulous. Patient. My gut twists. I don't know why

Reaper is antagonizing him. One wrong word, and he could order any of his soldiers to hurt Delilah.

"You told me the girl is prepared to cooperate. I want to see how you've trained her," Father says, gesturing again to our plates for us to eat. "I've seen her loyalty. But I want to see how you've gained it. See her train. I want to ensure her progression and dedication to this mission and to you."

"And there it is." Reaper's fork clatters onto his plate, and he leans back in his seat. "The reason you're here. To make sure we're following your orders."

Fallon's fist slams down on the wooden table, the sound cracking through the room. The glasses and plates rattle, and I catch my water glass before it falls over. Reaper doesn't flinch.

"Have you forgotten why we're here?" Fallon's voice rises sharply. "Have you forgotten why we began this mission?"

"How could I?" Reaper says, voice dripping with ice. "But I'm thinking it's possible you have."

Fallon stands upright, adjusting his tie, and I can tell by his expression that whatever peace he was trying to make, whatever amends, has been discarded.

We're his soldiers again, not his sons.

"You trusted me to set this mission up," Reaper says. "You have trusted me to run it. Yet it seems you don't trust my tactics."

Fallon lets out a strange laugh, but sits back down. He looks at me. "Have you heard?"

My brows knit, thrown by the change in topic and Father's tone. It's light again. Airy, setting my teeth on edge.

"Zane called off the marriage with the Julian girl." Father's eyes sweep to Reaper, who remains motionless. My heart leaps, and I grip my fork tightly, trying not to react. "Right before he was attacked."

Fuck. Which one? Did Breaker lose it or Viper? Either man losing control would be detrimental to the mission.

Father smiles, cold and calculated. "Clyde contacted me early this morning. Your brother has once again defied an order. Breaker, it seems, did what Breaker does best, and needlessly tortured Zane Devin."

"I doubt it was needless," Reaper says, shoving up the sleeves of his black shirt. "Zane must have provoked him."

Father ignores him and continues. “And Clyde’s reporting that Rune knows it was one of us.”

“Which means he’s aware we’re close.” I say, worry settling in my gut.

Did Zane hurt Cora? Breaker would never compromise the mission unless something happened.

“Precisely.” Father leans back in his seat and looks at me. “All communication must cease. Do not contact your brothers or Clyde until you return.”

“Return?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says. “Prepare to return tomorrow.”

My heart skips. “That isn’t possible.”

“No,” Reaper says, lazily moving pieces of food around the plate with his fork. “I need him here.”

Father closes his eyes briefly then leans forward, bracing his forearms on the edge of the table, and steepling his fingers under his chin. “Please, *syn*, tell me why having Striker here is vital to the girl’s training.”

Every time he refers to her as girl, it grates on me.

“She has a terrible aim,” Reaper tells him, “She’s good with a knife and with hand-to-hand combat, but with Viper gone, I need Striker to focus on improving her shot so I can focus on setting up the rest of the mission.”

Nodding, Father sits back in his seat, and I’m a little surprised as he seems to take Reaper’s words into consideration. “I suppose it won’t hurt to wait another week.”

“Three,” Reaper says. “Like I said, she is a terrible shot.”

Fallon glances at the soldiers lined up behind us over his shoulder. “I have men who can train her.”

“She trusts us,” I add, not liking the thought of Reaper alone with Fallon, completely cut off from us, trying to protect Delilah, not only from Fallon, but from each of the men behind us.

Father raises two fingers. “Two weeks. And if she hasn’t improved, then we take the chance. The longer she’s gone, the less Rune will trust her when she returns.”

Reaper’s fork drops to the plate and he stands, but Fallon motions for him to sit.

“I want to see this,” he says and turns to the line of soldiers behind us. “Get the girl.”

57 and 55 turn and march from the room, the other three filling in the gap so the door remains blocked.

I ease a breath from my lungs, reminding myself to stay calm, and set my fork down, leaning back in my seat. She's going to be terrified when they retrieve her, and the thought of them putting their hands on her makes all that fury coil again in my gut.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Reaper says, shifting my focus back to him. "I thought we established—"

"Silence," Fallon snaps. "Since whatever tactics you've used to gain her loyalty seem to have worked, I want to see how you interact with her." A faint smile curls his lip, making my skin grow cold. "I can imagine they are rather unconventional."

Reaper remains quiet, and I know he's debating his next move. My mind races, wondering how we've gained her loyalty. Cora played a huge part in that, but Father doesn't know this.

"Very well," Reaper says, pulling his mask from his back pocket and slipping it over his head. He looks at me. "She's more than likely hungry."

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Chapter 16

Delilah

STRIKER LOCKED ME IN this room hours ago, and not knowing what is happening downstairs creates a slithering fear in my belly. I've imagined everything from Striker lying dead in a pool of blood to Reaper being restrained with a belt taken to his back. Even though I keep telling myself I didn't hear gunshots and yelling, I can't settle my mind.

The thought of either of them getting hurt, of them once again being forced to their knees and subjected to the cruelty I witnessed last night, makes my stomach roil. I pace the room, trying to keep myself centered, refusing to give in to the dark fear coating every thought, but then all thoughts vanish as the slick sound of the lock opening crashes through me. The door swings open, and my heart plummets to my feet. Two black-clad soldiers march into the room and stand on either side of the open door.

The black eyewear is gone today, revealing their eyes and a bit of their brows. One has muddy brown eyes and blonde brows surrounded by fair skin. The other blue eyes, with dark brows, and pale skin. Blue Eyes has a few inches on Muddy Eyes, and moves with more ease, like he's less tense. Or less angry.

There are subtle differences in their uniforms too. Slightly different belts. The knives and guns at their hips, along with black metallic-looking numbers on their chests that almost blend in with the black material. Blue Eyes has the number 55, while Muddy Eyes has the number 57.

Names? Identifiers?

“Go,” the man with 57 on his uniform orders, those flat eyes moving up and down my body as invasive as hands.

My skin crawls under his slithering gaze. I changed into one of my dresses and put my boots on, my little knife tucked between my boot and sock just in case, and it seems from the creepy feeling slicking over my skin, he likes my outfit.

“Downstairs. Now,” the other one, 55, says, but he doesn’t seem too interested in me.

I gather my dress in a fist to settle my shaking hand, and take a step forward, but the creepy one grips my arm and panic seizes my breath. With a violent jerk of my arm, I pull free and glare at him.

“Do not lay a hand on me,” I snarl. 57 makes a move toward me, but I shove past him and step between them into the hall.

“Too much sass,” he mumbles. “I bet I know how to fix that.”

I swallow, keeping my head high, refusing to show fear as I stalk down the hall toward the stairs.

“Shut the fuck up,” 55 whispers to 57. “If Commander were to hear that, he’d remove your head.”

My shoulders ease somewhat. *Noted*.

Right as my boot brushes the first step, a hand clasps around the back of my neck. Before I can scream, a large gloved palm clamps over my mouth, and I’m jerked back into a hard chest, pain searing through my bruised ribs. My hands fly up to grasp the thick glove covering half my face, smashing my nose.

“Come on, bitch,” 57 snarls. “Commander wants to see how they pull your strings.”

He uncovers my mouth, but keeps the hand on my neck and shoves me forward. I stumble, catching myself on the railing, grinding my teeth, trying my best not to react.

Do everything I ask. Reaper’s order rings in my head. I take an unsteady step and then another, my thoughts spinning.

If I’m being taken downstairs to Fallon, then that means they must be okay. But god knows what they endured for the last few hours. I shove down the fear rattling my bones with a deep breath, and relax, not fighting, as he shoves me forward again.

“Don’t fight me, bitch,” 57 snarls, and for a millisecond, I debate snatching my knife from my boot and stabbing him in the balls, but know

the ramifications wouldn't be worth it.

We continue down the steps, then through the foyer and down the hall toward the dining room, his hand at my neck guiding my every move. His fingers dig sharply into my neck, making me wince, and every time he steers me in a new direction, he jerks me violently, and by the time we've reached the dining room, my neck is sore and my ribs ache.

We stop behind a wall of soldiers blocking the door. They part, and 57 shoves me forward. I stumble through the gap between the soldiers, nearly falling to my knees. My gaze lands immediately on Striker, dressed in uniform and mask, standing to the right of the table. I catch the way his bare hands flex like it's taking every ounce of control to remain still.

"57." Reaper's dark growl creates goosebumps on my arms. My eyes dart to where he stands on the other side of the long wooden table with the familiar tray of food. His black eyes swirl with violence. "If you touch her again, I will remove your hand."

"Yes, sir," 57 says.

I'm a little surprised that he called Reaper sir, and it makes me wonder about the dynamics between these soldiers and my men. Did they train together? Fallon implied he doesn't treat these soldiers like he does his sons, so maybe that means they take orders from Reaper as well?

"You are dismissed."

I stiffen at the sound of Fallon's voice. Instinctively, I shrink away as I turn and find him at the end of the line of five soldiers. The line breaks, and they file out one by one, leaving just the four of us.

The urge to ask about Cora, to scream at him for taking her back, taking her away from me, burns my throat, but I swallow it down.

Reaper snaps his fingers. The sound ricochets through my head like a whip, forcing my focus to him. Reaper gestures to the chair he had just occupied. "It's time to eat."

I swallow, glancing at Striker, who pulls out the chair at the head of the table and gives me a lethal glare before sitting.

Sit.

Eat.

With another look Fallon's way, I inch forward, my dress clutched tightly to keep my hands from shaking, and ease myself down into the chair. Another quick look at Striker and I catch his eyes widen slightly as he glances at the table before me. With my heart thundering so hard, I'm sure

they can hear it, I place my hands flat on the table, palms down, fingers splayed. Striker visibly relaxes.

Pull your strings.

My teeth gnash together as it dawns on me. Fallon wants to see my compliance. My submission. He is here to witness how they got my cooperation. I'm about to get fucking fed again, and this time it isn't sensual, woven tightly with lusty seduction; it's wrought with demands.

Reaper tears off a piece of bread, moving in close enough that his hip brushes my shoulder, and leans against the edge of the table. I stare at his belt, thinking of the first time we did this. How he was so hard, his cock strained against his black pants. He's not hard now. I glance at his bare hands, one thumb hooked into his waistband, the other in front of my face offering bread. So casual, so calm. I want to look up to see his eyes, see if they are as dark with dread as I feel, but keep still.

"Open," Reaper orders.

Do everything I say.

I guess we're doing this.

Trying not to glare in Fallon's direction, I open my mouth and let him place food on my tongue. He makes sure his fingers don't touch my lips, and I make sure to chew and swallow and reopen without being asked. My heart races, the tension in the room so thick, I can taste it with each bite. I've seen what happens when Fallon's demands aren't met, and I never want to experience that again. Even if it means I'm humiliated in front of him.

"Good girl," Striker says, trailing a finger along my cheek.

My face heats, hating Fallon seeing him touch me, but know he's putting on a show. Because that's what this is. I'm not stupid. They are trying to appease him. Keep him from lashing out in that rage-fueled violent display once again.

How did they survive this? How is Striker so sweet? But then I remember the sting of the belt he took to my ass, the slightly cruel hint of the chase through the woods, the edge of pain to their teasing me on this very table, and know none of them are exactly sweet. They're just as capable of cruelty as Fallon, but are maybe saved by their love for each other.

And their affection for me.

Fallon says nothing as I continue to eat, the room completely silent, except for the crunch of crackers, and Striker's occasional praise. Tension spirals like a live wire, crackling and popping along my spine as each silent minute stretches into another. I keep expecting Fallon to order them to do something, but he remains still, just off to the side, watching our every move.

Reaper seems to grow tenser with each passing second, like he's waiting too, and my whole body aches with how rigid I am. When he places the last bit of food in my mouth, Striker hands me a glass of water, and I take it, my hands slick with sweat, and say, "Thank you."

He seems to relax, but I can still feel Reaper's unease like it's my own.

"Interesting," Fallon says, and my focus shifts to him as he takes the chair across the table from me. He glances up at Reaper. "She's a quick study."

I'm about to tell him he can address me since I'm right here, but he's right. I am a fast learner. He doesn't need to remind me what happens when we don't obey, or how quickly the men are put in place if one of them falls out of line.

And I'm now one of them.

"She's highly motivated," Reaper says, and he's not wrong either. "What she lacks in skill, she makes up for in agility and intelligence."

"Intelligence," Fallon repeats, those eerily icy eyes assessing me. "I see you've all learned a valuable lesson. Do you now understand the consequences of disobeying an order?"

Fucking psychopath, I want to scream, but tuck it behind my teeth and smile at him.

"Answer me, girl," Fallon says. "You're allowed to speak when you're asked a question, as long as you are respectful."

I swallow all the disrespectful things I'd like to say and smile again. "You've taught me a valuable lesson," I say, each word laced with just enough sweetness that it's barely respectful. "I now know exactly what you are."

He seems to like that answer because his hard, stern features fracture, and he smiles. It's so breathtaking and such a contrast to everything I've seen from him so far that I shift uncomfortably in my seat. I'm reminded that Fallon was, still is, a breathtakingly handsome man, and just like every

other psychopath in history, he's more than capable of being charming. Probably drips with it when he wants to.

"You remind me so much of her," he says, gaze dragging all over my face. "You have your father's eyes, so blue and cunning. His black hair. His intelligence." Fallon leans forward, placing his forearms on the table. "But you have her drive and her spark."

My heart skips around in my chest as his words sink in. *Her.* My mother.

"You knew her?" The question slips out. I glance at Striker, who's not looking my way, then up at Reaper beside me. I feel him tense even more than before, so I clamp my mouth shut, trapping the many questions before they tumble from my lips.

Fallon smiles again, but this time it's colder. Darker. "Indeed."

I sit upright, my heart no longer skipping but thundering. My mother was killed fifteen years ago. How far back he goes with my father is unsettling, yet I never saw him. I would have remembered seeing this man.

"I knew Sophia well," Fallon says, and the way he says her name, how it slips out of his mouth, warm and smooth, creates little goosebumps along my arms. Like he can sense how I'm suddenly bursting with questions, Fallon smiles again, and it looks genuine this time, but still laced with a faint hint of cruelty. "She was beautiful. Even more so than you." An almost apologetic smile flashes across his face. "Your father was madly in love with her. He lost his mind after her death. Failed to see reality or listen to reason. I was forced to cut ties."

Her death. As if she slipped gracefully into the afterlife. Like she hadn't been shot on a sidewalk on my birthday.

"Murdered, you mean," I say.

Fallon quirks one perfect brow and dips his head, agreeing.

I remember how my father changed after she died. He was harder, but then Cora came to live with us shortly after, and she was all I needed. She became my entire world.

She still is.

And this motherfucker sent her back to marry Zane. This cruel, cunning man, who hurts his sons to keep control, who took a belt to my back to punish them.

"It's a shame Clyde chose to stay with Rune after he went mad." Fallon keeps his focus on me, gauging my reaction, but I do my best to give

him nothing. “He chose the wrong side for a long time, but I understand why he stayed.”

I bite my lip, taking a deep breath. Reaper not-so-subtly let me know Clyde is their source, so this doesn’t come as a surprise. What does is that Fallon’s so openly speaking to me.

“May I ask you a question?” I say.

“You may,” he says, smiling again, almost fatherly. It sends a weird shiver through me with how genuine it feels. “Whether I choose to answer will be determined.”

“Fair enough,” I say, noting his relaxed demeanor. It’s easy to see how he could charm someone into believing he’s nice and kind, covering up his cutting brutality with layers of charm and honey. Like he is now. Smiling reassuringly as if his violent outburst and death threats were merely caused by our actions, not his demented cruelty. “What did you do to my father that he murdered your son?”

Fallon’s eyes narrow slightly, his shoulders stiffening. Appears he doesn’t like this question, and just when I think he’s not going to answer, he says, “The real question isn’t what did I do to anger Rune. The real question is, what didn’t he do?”

The screech of his chair moving back as he stands screams through my mind almost as loudly as his words. I attempt to stand, ready to ask him what he means, but Reaper’s hand slams down on my shoulder, keeping me in my seat.

“Tomorrow,” Fallon says, gesturing to me, but looking between Reaper and Striker. “Her training begins.”

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Chapter 17

Viper

16 years Ago, December, Age 16

A FAMILIAR SOUND WINDS THROUGH my brain. Distant at first, then it grows clearer. Louder. A constant hum of a machine on top of a faint thudding sound. Like when a brutal winter storm moves through, lashing the school with sleet, making the loose iron bars over the windows slam against the stone building.

Thwack, thwack, thwack.

But then I hear another sound, a faint whimper followed by a sniffle.

“Who the fuck is crying?” I ask, but my voice comes out raspy, almost hollow, like I lost it, but when I found it again, it was only half there.

“Don’t move,” a familiar voice says. Sweet, angelic. A little squeaky at the ends.

I pry an eye open, and that’s when the pain hits me. Not just in my head from the bright white light overhead, but the fire that’s burning my

back. Did hell finally swallow me up? From the intense burn eating at my limbs, the tips of my fingers, and racing over my back like fire ants, I'd have sworn the devil dragged me to the depths with him. But Breaker is here, so I'm still trapped on Earth.

A crackle and rumbling sound splits through my head. One I recognize. The useless radiators around the school that barely keep this place livable.

So not hell, but only a few steps away.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I open my eyes again. My gaze locks on Breaker's bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks looming over me.

"Back off," I grate, shoving him aside. The water-stained ceiling comes into view, and confusion swirls through me. Another attempt at sitting makes my head buzz, and more fiery pain shoots through my back, but I bite through it and place my bare feet on the cold floor.

"Stop crying," I rasp, doing my best to remember why I'm in bed.

No, not just a bed. The infirmary. I catch sight of the cuff on my arm, the sensor on my pointer finger. The monitor beeping next to me, showing my vitals. I glance down at the faded green hospital gown and frown.

This isn't the first time I've landed here, but it is the first that I can't remember why. A broken nose and fingers, a fractured bone here or there from trying to show off, have Doc and me well acquainted. But he's not in here, just Breaker.

"What happened?" I ask, attempting to stand but sit back down immediately when my head swims.

"Striker." He swipes at a tear and sniffles. "He freaked when Father said it was his turn."

"To do what?" The second the words leave my mouth, I remember. The bread. Icy cold and the rooftop. Father's punishment. The belt and cutting pain. My brother's expected to dole out Father's violence on me as a reminder to obey his every word. "Shit."

Another tear slips down Breaker's round cheek. Stupid kid. Stupid *me*. I swear Breaker is going to be the death of me if he doesn't stop acting out. Whenever he's hurt or hungry, I can't stop myself from protecting him. And I suffer every damn time because of it.

I reach behind me to feel my back. The skin is mostly smooth except for a few welts and a long series of bandages.

“Doc says you’re lucky Father stopped when he did,” Breaker says. “That you’d have died of hypothermia if Reaper hadn’t stepped in.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, shooting upright, my gut churning. My hand catches the side of the monitor as my head spins. I breathe through it, then reach for Breaker. My fingers somehow feel numb, yet cold, like they are still covered in ice as they wrap around his uniform and tug him close. “What did Reaper do?”

His chin quivers. “Striker panicked when Father told him he was next.” He stops speaking and takes a deep breath as a tear slips out, so I shake him a little to get him talking again. His eyes go wide, and he says, “Reaper told Father to stop, because he was about to take the belt to Striker. So Father said Reaper was to take your punishment.”

Fuck. When I rip the cuff off and remove the sensor from my finger, the machinery screams. The noise blares through my head angrily, but stops the second I yank the plug from the wall.

“Keep talking, kid,” I spit out, looking around for my uniform. I spot it folded on the chair in the corner and lunge for it, nearly toppling to the floor. My palm smacks against the wall before I fall. “Where is everyone now?”

“We’re on lockdown.”

My shoulders ease as I slip my pants on under the gown. “If we’re on lockdown, how are you here?”

Breaker’s eyes fall to his feet. “Father said because I was the only one who followed orders, I got to see you.”

A chuckle slips out of me. Breaker is the last one I’d ever guess Father would reward for following a command. When I untie the gown at the back and slip it off and Breaker doesn’t look up, eyeing me—because the kid constantly looks—I sigh.

“Stop feeling guilty,” I tell him. “Be proud you followed an order for once.”

Those stark blue eyes meet mine. “I hurt you.”

I squeeze his shoulder. “Father hurt me, not you. Besides, I’m fine.”

As I lean over to grab my shirt, the faint slapping sound breaks through the fog in my head. It’s been in the background this entire time, blending with the faint hum of the radiator, but I was barely paying attention to it.

Thwack, thwack, thwack.

Slow, repetitive. Methodical. A minute in between each slick sound. It echoes through the school, bouncing off the walls as it travels down the dark, dirty halls.

I drop my sock, my insides freezing all over again. My breath grows ragged as everything around me slows as I turn to Breaker.

“Where’s Reaper?” I ask, my voice gravelly.

A rattling sob escapes, and he covers his face with hands that look too big on a twelve-year-old boy.

My shirt falls to the floor. A humming noise fills my head, the familiar sound from my past, scraping the inside of my skull with thin fingers.

I take one step toward the door, then another, stuck in slow-motion horror before the next harsh *slap* cuts through the noise in my head and I break into a run.

My bare feet smack the vinyl floor. I crash into the wall, knocking my head against the rough concrete. My vision blurs, pain blasting through my temple, but I right myself and stumble forward.

Behind me, Breaker yells my name, his voice laced with terror, but I don’t stop.

I can’t.

Each stumbling step takes me closer, and the echoing cracking sound grows louder. With my hand out, catching myself on doors and corners, I run and skid to a stop at the start of the hall to our sleeping quarters.

Each door stands open so every boy hiding in his room can hear the reminder we are to obey. Follow his every command.

Father stands in the center of the hall, and as he draws back his arm, ready to release the belt yet again, I run forward, a scream ripping from me, and grip his wrist. With my other hand, I grab the leather, winding it around my wrist, and yank it free of his grasp.

“Fucking stop,” I grate.

Father turns my way, and the metal buckle clanks to the floor by my feet as I step back, taking in the mask of rage contorting his features. Something dark and twisted turns his lip into a cruel snarl. Turns his wintery eyes into a cold, desolate landscape. My eyes drop to the little red splatters on his vest.

My chest heaves. “Please. Stop.” I look down at the trembling body at his feet, and my fist flies to my mouth, pressing against my lips.

Reaper kneels, one hand on the floor, arm shaking, barely keeping him upright. Blood coats his tanned skin, and thick slices mar his back from the belt carved deeply into his flesh. Several lashes hit his shoulder and biceps, oozing wet scarlet.

"Jesus," I whisper, ripping my eyes from Reaper to look at Father. "What the fuck is wrong with you!"

Those cold eyes burn into me, and he grips my shoulder, his hand drawing back.

"Why do you hate him?" I yell, wincing, bracing for his hit.

Father drops his fist. "I do not hate him!" he screams, the madness in his tone bouncing off the walls. "He is my son!"

Reaper's arm quivers, but he remains upright. We need to get him to Doc, but I'm too scared to move.

"But this constant interference has to stop." Father's scream tears through the hallway, and I flinch. Father is controlled and precise. Now he's wild and enraged, a terrible monster on a warpath to remove any signs of weakness from us all. "This affection he has for all of you, it is a weakness. Love is a weakness!"

It's like he hears his words, the absolute madness in his tone, echoing back to him, and he takes a step back, smoothing down his shirt. "Reaper was born to be strong. Bred to be a soldier. I made sure of it. But he's the weakest of my sons."

Father takes another step away, and my body eases. I dare a glance around and spot Cook at the start of the hall, but realize Hunter is nowhere to be found. He wouldn't be in his room, standing by while Father unleashed his fury on our brother. He'd be a snapping dog trying to stop him.

The realization he's not here sends a dark, creeping terror slipping under my skin. With a subtle movement of my hand, I gesture for Cook to come closer.

"Father," I say, keeping my tone even. Like if I speak slowly and clearly, he won't slip back into a fit of rage. "Where is Hunter?"

A cutting laugh slips out of him. He motions to the last door in the hall. Hunter's room. "Locked away," he snarls. "He tried to take half of the punishment. *Half*."

Of course he did, I think as my shoulders drop, tension unwinding a fraction. That's what they do. What we all do.

Father trained us to obey his code. We are a unit, yet every time we stand together, try to protect one another, he goes into a rage. Like the bond he ensured we created with one another, is traitorous. Because we care more for each other than for him.

My gaze slips to Reaper as his arm gives and he leans over, placing his forehead on the dirty floor. A deep ache rattles my heart, seeing him so wounded. In pain. Once again trying to protect us.

I sense Cook coming up behind me. Taking a chance, I lean down, keeping an eye on Father as I brush Reaper's sweaty hair away from his face. Tears prick my eyes, and everything in me screams to take care of him, but I have to calm Father down. Redirect him.

Reaper turns his head to look my way, teeth gnashing together as he winces. Blood slips over his back from the open gashes, gathering at the base of his neck. His black eyes meet mine, and an icy dread climbs down my spine.

Father has left us brutally bruised, skin laced with cuts, but the violent rage it took to create such deep slices in Reaper's skin is like something I've never witnessed from him. The monster Father keeps tightly leashed was just freed, and Reaper got caught between its teeth.

"We need to get him to the infirmary," I say, my tone controlled. "These will get infected, and we can't lose our strongest soldier."

Trying to use logic on a wild tiger may well end up with me tied back to the pole on the roof, but I'll do anything at this point to get him away from Reaper.

When I stand up, Father looks down at Reaper, and I swear I see a flash of remorse. He turns to Cook, who's keeping me between him and Father. "Get him to the infirmary. He just needs a few stitches."

I curl my fingers into my fist, staring down at the criss-cross lines over Reaper's back and arms. He's going to need more than a few.

I help Cook drag Reaper to his feet, my pulse skipping when he staggers. I grind my teeth, pressing my eyes closed at the sight of him. At the horror of what our father has done.

Father jabs a finger into my chest, drawing my focus back to him. "One day you will learn that to love is pain. Because the one you love will always, always betray you."

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Chapter 18

Delilah

LAST NIGHT I TOSSED and turned, barely sleeping. Sick of lying in bed, I rose at sunrise, dressed in a tank and pulled on a large sweater with big round buttons, figuring my TEAM PLAYER hoodie was best left in the armoire. Then I slipped on leggings and boots, tucking my knife neatly against my thick sock, and sat down to wait.

But the waiting is just as torturous as lying in bed unable to sleep, so I've resorted to pacing. My stomach twists with every creak of wood, and I can't seem to calm myself even though I know it's just the house settling.

I feel out of sorts. Like someone sliced me up and put me back together the wrong way. I never thought I'd so desperately long to be at Reaper's side, but here I am, locked in my room, once again my jail cell, wishing he was here. Wishing Striker were here too.

Viper.

Tears sting my eyes. He went to Cora. He is keeping her safe, along with Breaker, and that thought alone makes my nerves settle some. There is no way they'd let anything happen to her.

My stomach twists thinking of her anywhere near Rune or Zane.

I'm not sure what all the mission entails, or how they plan on getting close enough to Rune to get into his lodge, but in the end, it doesn't matter. I have one job. Get into his room, open the safe, and then kill him.

My heart skips at the thought, but I force myself to remember what I overheard Cora tell the men. The images Reaper showed me, the hand-

carved figurines created by the brother they all lost. The sick hunts. Rune and the people who take part, have to go.

And it's up to me to do it.

The lock on my door slides, snapping my focus to it. My heart hammers, and I bolt to the end of my bed, gripping the bedrail with one sweaty hand, and wait. The door opens, and my stomach lurches when 55 and 57 step into the room.

"Put this on," 55 says, holding out a large black jacket. I take it, feeling the thick wool between my fingers. It looks like the peacoat Breaker gave Cora to wear, but smaller.

Keeping my eyes on them, I slip it on. I don't like these men. Especially 57. My gut tells me to keep an eye on him as he drags his gaze over me.

"What are your names?" I ask as I button the coat.

"Doesn't matter. Let's go," 57 says, gesturing to the doorway.

I tilt my ankle, feeling my little knife. I really, really don't like this one.

As I pass between him and 55, I expect him to grab me and shove me forward, but he doesn't touch me. With both soldiers at my back, I walk down the hall, then down the stairs, my skin pricking with unease. I don't like them behind me, especially 57, but he keeps his hands to himself the entire way to the foyer.

Guess Reaper's threat yesterday did its job.

"Kitchen," 57 snaps, and I turn toward it robotically.

When I enter the room, I expect to find the men and Fallon waiting with a tray of food, but the room is empty. Instead of a tray, there's a bowl of mushy oatmeal on the table with a spoon and a glass of water.

"Eat," 57 says and points to the chair.

I do as instructed, my stomach a jumble of nerves. Every bite goes down with a struggle, but I clear the bowl and down the glass of water, wondering where everyone is.

After I finish the food, they take me outside. In the driveway, a sleek black Bentley is parked beside three large transit vans. 57 points toward the long drive that leads to the carriage house, and I instantly know we're headed toward the range.

A blast of cold winter air blows my hair in my face, and I swipe it away, cursing myself for not grabbing a hair tie. I glance at the ocean,

wishing Cora were here, then scrub that wish away. The last thing I want is Cora anywhere near these men or Fallon.

57 shoves at my shoulder. “Go.”

“Hands off,” I remind him as I tuck my chin into the collar of my black jacket and head down the drive.

“Try to run, and it won’t end well for you,” he says.

Of course, my mind conjures up the image of when the men thought I tried to escape, which makes my cheeks heat.

“No need to worry,” I tell him. “It’s too early to run.”

55 chuckles. “Tell that to Striker.”

I glance over my shoulder and catch his eye. He drops his gaze and furrows his brows, like he forgot he wasn’t supposed to talk to me. It makes me wonder about their lives. If they lived at the same school and had the same upbringing, but then I remember Fallon saying he’d made a mistake treating my men like his sons.

My men.

Mine, as in no one can touch them, hurt them, demean them.

No one. Including their father, yet I’m powerless to stop him.

Reaper never promised me he’d tell me everything, much less leave the cruel grasp of Fallon’s control, but I hope they all do.

Then what, Delilah?

Focusing on the rocky drive to keep my brain from exploring that too deeply, I trudge along the rocky path, my boots crunching under each determined step.

It’s not the first time I’ve had the random thought pass through me, but it is the first time I’ve felt it lined with such want. Seeing the level of violence they have endured makes me ache for them, and I think this is the first time I’ve admitted to myself I want to be all theirs.

And, I want every detail, every scar, every fragment of memory.

Striker has fed me bits and pieces of their past over the last four weeks, Reaper told me more, and Fallon inadvertently told the most with just the few conversations we’ve had. I know they were in a school and were trained as mercenaries of sorts. They went on jobs, hired by who I can only assume are people like Rune, to do god knows what, all the while, gaining immense wealth and power.

Fallon most of all.

They aren’t so different, Rune and Fallon. Greedy. Cruel. It makes me wonder if Fallon would have cared about the hunts if Rune had not killed his son, but then I remember he said he was forced to cut ties years prior, which makes it sound as if something happened. Or maybe Fallon’s level of evil doesn’t fall to the perverse depths as Rune.

From what I understand, their friendship developed before my mother was killed. Fallon told me as much. I assume he meant my father started the hunts after her death, and that’s when my father changed, became crazed.

Is there a correlation between the hunts and my mother’s death?

My father went to the lodge not that long after my mother’s funeral. But then Cora came to live with us, so it didn’t matter to eleven-year-old me that he was not just distant but different. I had my best friend, and she was just as sad as I was about the loss of a mother.

“Hurry,” 57 says, hitting the center of my back and shoving me forward. I stumble a little, and shoot him a look as I right myself.

“Reaper won’t be too happy to hear you’re touching me,” I remind him.

“Shut up, bitch,” he says, and does it again.

“Stop it, man,” 55 says. “You know Reaper means what he says.”

My stomach dips, remembering Reaper’s warning. I like the idea of him hurting anyone who touches me. Maybe a little too much to be sane.

“He’s a prick,” 57 says.

I bristle at the insult, but keep my mouth shut. Yes, Reaper is a straight-up asshole, but that’s not all he is. He’s layered, with more depth than the man behind me.

“He’s also Commander’s son, so it’s best to heed his warning,” 55 says, and I turn to agree with him when the men come into view.

My belly flutters, seeing them in their masks and tight uniforms. The black jackets that make them look even larger. How imposing Reaper and Striker both look, standing in the middle of the open road, framed by the tall trees and dark woods on one side and the rolling ocean on the other. Just the sight of them in all-black uniforms, rigid postures, would elicit fear in anyone who doesn’t know them. Even with Fallon next to them, who emanates a force all his own, they radiate power.

How easily it crumbles when their father asserts his.

As I approach, Fallon makes a movement with his hand, signaling the men to move toward the cliff. When they turn to follow his order, I spot the large knives sheathed in black, strapped to their belts. Unease grips my throat. I've not once seen weapons on them since I woke up.

That they are choosing now to carry them sends pinpricks up my spine.

Fallon strides toward a long wooden table set in the clearing where I usually practice and waits as I approach. It looks so out of place with its glossy varnish and engraved corners, placed in the open space before the trees where a large target sits. Various guns cover the top, along with ammo boxes and earmuffs. 57 and 55 take position a few feet away, but not nearly as far back as the men.

"Good morning," Fallon says, holding out a hand, and beckoning me toward him. He's wearing another suit, charcoal with a blood red tie, and a long black leather coat that reaches his knees like some sort of movie villain.

Glancing toward the men, I note they are tense, but say nothing. When they remain unmoving, I walk forward and I place my hand in his, fleetingly thinking how his long fingers remind me of Reaper. The slight squeeze he gives my hand should reassure me, but my pulse skyrockets, and I cast a look over my shoulder at the men.

No reaction.

"You didn't sleep well," Fallon says, drawing my focus back to him. His features seem softer today, his entire demeanor less volatile, which makes me tense. Men like him aren't soft or nice. Men like him, casually cruel yet so beautiful it's an assault to the senses, aren't crafted from the same materials as regular humans. Fallon is almost god-like in his perfection and brutal precision. "You appear tense."

I'm unsure if it's a question, and since I shouldn't answer unless asked one, and I don't know if casual conversation is permitted, I remain silent. The last thing I want to do is piss him off with all these weapons nearby.

"Are you nervous?" Fallon asks, still holding my hand and watching me.

I glance at the men standing off to the side, wondering why they are so far away, before answering. "Yes. I'm nervous you won't approve."

His faint smile tells me I made the right move, stroking his ego.

Rune, Fallon, every man with power they gained by stealing it, are just the same.

"From what Striker tells me, your aim needs work," Fallon says, still gripping my hand as he leads me to the table. He gives me a sideways glance and a smirk. "Then again, he's the best marksman I've ever seen, so I doubt he was fair in his assessment."

Laid out on the table are the different guns I've been training with all week, and Fallon picks up the small Sig.

"Is this the weapon you have been training with?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "I'm better with this one than the others."

"Good choice," Fallon hands me the weapon, and I automatically check to make sure it's not loaded with a round, then snap a clip into place. He nods slightly, then hands me earmuffs. "It's perfect for your size, and small enough to conceal."

Fallon gestures at the target, indicating I should begin. He picks up a pair of earmuffs for himself and takes a step back.

Part of me is amazed at his confidence. Either of his strong, powerful sons, whom he's abused for god knows how long, could pick one of these weapons up and end him. I could right now, but I don't. Not only have I never pointed a gun at someone, much less killed anyone, Fallon is the only way to stop Rune.

I glance over my shoulder, checking with the men yet again, before placing the earmuffs on my head. After they are secure, I adjust my stance slightly, then aim. The target ripples as I unload, then remove the empty clip and set them both down on the table once I'm done. I shove the earmuffs to my neck at the same time Fallon does.

He cocks his head to the side, like he's impressed or shocked. "Striker made it sound as if your aim was extremely poor, yet you've hit the mark every time."

My teeth grind, and I shoot Striker a narrow-eyed glare over my shoulder. They are far away, so I know he can't hear us, and I wonder if that's the point. If Fallon had them stand so far back that they weren't able to eavesdrop on our conversation.

From their tense posture, whatever game their father is playing is working.

Reaper and Striker are pissed. Whether it's from the fact they are excluded from our conversation or from him just being here in general, I'm

not sure, but the fact Fallon is asserting his control over them stirs up that new anger that refuses to leave me. He humiliated them in front of me and his soldiers. And even though there is a hierarchy that places my men higher in ranking, he's using these soldiers to control them.

And Fallon keeps kicking them at the knee.

"You've done well, which gives me hope that you'll improve quickly with more training," Fallon says, and steps back. "Continue with this one."

I pick up the gun and reload, my jaw clenched tightly, replacing my earmuffs over my head with jerky movements. When I aim, I picture Fallon's face, and I hit the target with every bullet.

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Chapter 19

Striker

WE'VE BEEN STANDING OUTSIDE in the cold for hours, and my patience is waning. Across the stretch of road, Fallon stands next to our girl, instructing her. Each time his hands brush her shoulder, a coil winds up tighter in my chest, and I have to force myself to remain still.

"Fuck this."

Beside me, Reaper's struggle is as palpable as my own, a dark, angry energy emanating from him in thick waves. Just like me, he's all too aware of the deliberate touches and praising smiles. And as one hour bleeds into the next, each lingering touch is pushing him dangerously close to the edge. One he can't fall over.

Neither of us can afford to lose control.

Not again.

We made the mistake of letting it slip, and now Father is using it against us. Our affection for Princess makes us vulnerable, makes her vulnerable. Fallon has proven time and time again he won't hesitate to manipulate us with threats to those we love.

Love.

The coil that's near breaking unravels, and my chest expands with a slow, steady inhale. I glance at Reaper, like he can sense my thoughts. Are we even capable of loving something so delicate? How dare I even think that any of us has a right to feel so deeply for her? For Cora? We've done nothing but inflict fear and pain.

“She’s cold, and he doesn’t care,” he says loudly, and I’m glad the words get carried away with the wind so Fallon doesn’t hear.

Reaper’s right. Fallon doesn’t care. Not about her comfort or her fear. It’s all part of the training. Keeping her on edge. Uncomfortable. Mixing in gentle praises with harsh criticism designed to wear her down.

Dragging her out into the cold, forcing her to practice, forcing his nearness on her as bitter winds whip off the water will ensure by the time he’s done with her, she’ll be exhausted, cold, and grateful to be locked inside her room again. Grateful to be away from him but still terrified of what he’ll do next.

I know because that’s exactly what he did with us.

Everything he’s *still* doing to us.

My focus shifts back to Delilah. A strong wind bursts off the water, and she tucks her chin into her little black coat. She looks so small and breakable in her leggings and small boots, hands buried in the pockets of the jacket. She must be exhausted. We’ve only had a week of training, and her body isn’t used to the hours of practice, much less this cold. I hope she’s warm enough. I hope…

Fuck. We’re so fucking *fucked*.

“He needs to keep his hands off her,” Reaper grates as Father pats her back. He’s so tense he’s nearly bursting out of his skin, glaring at Father, who’s positioned himself right next to her as he tests her skill. Which is doing nothing but testing Reaper.

Father’s entire plan, I’m sure.

As much as I detest him being close to her after his vicious display of power, I know he’s proven his point and won’t hurt her again unless provoked. He forced our hand. We’ve admitted we care for her. He has his ammunition, and we know to follow his every command so he doesn’t use it.

Now he just wants to ensure she’s capable. It’s not that he won’t turn at any second. That’s who Fallon is, hot and cold, but as long as we all play by his rules, he won’t lose his temper and take it out on our girl.

Years of watching a monster with sharp teeth and hidden claws taught me that Fallon can be reasonable and rarely takes unnecessary risks. Hurting Delilah further, he knows, would only further rip the divide starting between us, and he doesn’t want that.

He may have new soldiers, but we’re his first.

We’re his sons.

And he needs her trust as much as we do. Fallon is strategic in his warnings. He scared her, and us, just enough, and now he wants to see how loyal she truly is. Because if he doesn’t gain her full loyalty and trust her enough himself, I’m not sure he’ll send her back to Rune.

That thought sits heavily, and I glance again at Reaper. “He enjoys testing us,” I remind him, “but that’s not why he’s here.”

“Added bonus,” he says, sarcasm lining each word. “But you’re right. He needs to make sure she won’t tell Rune everything when she returns.”

“She won’t.”

Reaper rips his gaze from Father to meet my eyes. “No. She won’t.”

Our girl proved her loyalty with every harsh lash of the belt to her back. My gut churns at the memory, hating that we failed her so horribly.

Beside me, Reaper shifts, an angry growl slipping out.

“Calm the fuck down.” I nudge his arm with my elbow, and he shifts his glare from Father to me. I narrow my eyes. “He’s watching.”

Reaper’s body goes stiff as Father rests a hand on her shoulder. Her eyes dart back to us for reassurance. That she’s checking in with us, gauging our reaction, means she trusts us not just with her body, but with her safety.

Trust we don’t deserve.

The wind shifts, sending long black tendrils of shiny black hair across her face. She’s so stunningly beautiful, and so much stronger than we gave her credit for. Cora’s green eyes fill my mind. Viper and Breaker better be fucking taking care of her.

“She’s fine as long as we’re fine,” I say. “He’s going to touch her. Talk to her.”

I’m aware I’m trying to help ease my unsettled gut as much as assure Reaper. We’re all protective of one another, and this is the first time we’ve had something outside ourselves to worry over. To protect. To watch walk through life so vulnerable.

We’re a unit. And now we have two small, fragile women who hold our hearts and minds, and everything is fucking pure chaos inside me.

Inside us.

Because I’ve never seen Reaper so…*affected.*

Which screams he’s feeling everything I’m feeling right now.

Pissed off that our father, this violent, cruel man, dares to touch our girl. Furious with the four of us for being so blinded by revenge, we would hurt something so small and delicate to achieve it.

Father pulls her closer, and I clamp a hand on Reaper's shoulder to keep him still.

"Get a grip, Reap," I growl, knowing I need to talk with him later to find out why he's behaving this way.

He's always been so cold, stoic, rarely displaying emotion other than anger. I worried he'd lost his heart when we lost Hunter, with how callous he spoke of the girls over the years. But it seems he's found it again.

It makes me wonder how long Delilah has carried the fragments.

I know something happened between them the night he went to her. Some shift that's allowed him to connect with her on a deeper level that has him caring about her the way he cares for us, but he's behaving so outside his norm I'm concerned.

I know she's capable of pulling this off, so that can't be what has him so on edge. She's training hard. Decent with a gun and will improve with time.

"What is wrong with you?" I hiss. "Every time you react, he wins."

He shoots me a look, his jaw grinding under his mask, but says nothing.

Does he know something we don't? Reaper is manipulative and secretive, often keeping Fallon's orders from us until he's reduced the impact, or manipulated the outcome, which is why this sick worry churns in my gut.

Did Father give him an order that the rest of us may not like?

"He's too…" Reaper's voice trails off, but I know what he's going to say.

"Handsy," I say for him.

Touch her again, and I'll gut you. That is exactly what Reaper threatened, and Father is blatantly challenging him.

When Reaper and the rest of us planned this, Princess was just a tool. Now she's…

More.

So much more that she's become a liability. They both have. I don't know when or how Cora and Delilah went from being our bloody revenge to…

Fuck. I don’t know what they are.

Important.

Ours.

In need of protection from men like us.

“Fuck this,” Reaper growls.

My attention snaps to Delilah, and my blood turns to ice. Fallon stands behind her, his chest pressed to her back, hands on her small arms, coaching her on how to hold the large automatic rifle.

“Reaper,” I warn, gripping his forearm, but he rips free, and stalks forward with deadly intent.

I adjust my mask as I follow, knowing that interfering will just make things worse.

God, it’s going to be a long two weeks.

“I’ll do it,” Reaper says, shoving his hand between Fallon and our girl. “Step back.”

I don’t miss the flash of a smirk as Fallon throws his hands up and takes a large step back, allowing Reaper to move into his place. He looks my way. “I believe this is Striker’s job, since you were so desperate to keep him here.”

I clasp a hand on Reaper’s shoulder. His gaze darts my way. Wild, manic darkness swirls like shadows behind his eyes.

“She’s fine,” I say.

Reaper’s jaw moves under his mask. He swipes a hand over his mask and turns to Father. “We’re done here. I’m taking her back to the house, and we’ll resume tomorrow.”

Father clasps his hands behind his back, rocking back on his heels. The smile and calm demeanor scream with a cruel glee. This entire morning was not just about testing Princess, but us too. And Reaper walked right into his trap.

He might as well have yelled at the top of his lungs that she’s no longer just a mission.

She’s ours.

His.

“Very well.” Father gestures to the table. “Striker, take these back to the house and clean them.” With that fucking smirk still in place, he walks away, motioning for his new soldiers to follow.

The second his back is to us, Delilah steps away from the table, grasping Reaper's arm. "What happened?"

Reaper weaves his fingers into the shiny black strands of her hair and pulls her to his chest. "He was too close. No one touches you."

I lean down, pressing my masked lips to the top of her head, keeping my focus on Father as he walks down the path to make sure he doesn't turn around.

"He was purposely trying to piss us off," I tell her, then grab a bag from under the table as I say to Reaper, "Better get her to her room before he changes his mind."

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Chapter 20

Delilah

TWO SOLDIERS STAND ON either side of the front door as we enter, Reaper nearly dragging me by my arm over the threshold. Pain twinges in my arm from his tight grip, but he's so tense, so upset, that I don't fight him as he aggressively drags me into the house. Warmth hits my frozen limbs and I sigh in relief. Fallon kept me out there for hours and my fingers feel like icicles. I'm so grateful to be in the warm house, that I don't protest as Reaper all but shoves me ahead of him through the foyer, even when my ribs throb.

My stomach growls so loud that he stops walking and lets me go. The urge to apologize rushes through me, but I clamp my mouth shut, rubbing my cold nose with an icy hand. Remembering I'm not allowed to talk or be human, proves to be more difficult than one would think.

"You're hungry," Reaper says, his midnight eyes scanning me.

I bite my lip to keep from saying, *Obviously*. Your *insane father kept me out in the cold for hours shooting a target so I can kill* my *father.*

Without another word, he grips my arm again and drags me in the opposite direction of the stairs. The two soldiers positioned by the door, follow us, their boots thudding ominously behind us. Reaper casts them a deadly look as he steers me toward the long hall that leads to the back of the house. When the two continue to walk behind us, I glance at Reaper by my side, and he finally looks my way, his eyes darker than usual.

God, he's furious. But I'm not sure what has him more upset. He was pissed that Fallon was so close to me. That was obvious, but this intense, deadly energy emitting from him has me feeling unsteady. Like there's a bomb ticking nearby, but I'm not sure if it's him about to explode or some other threat I can't see.

"Resume your positions," Reaper barks out, not looking their way, his entire tone and body screaming authority.

"Commander said to take her to her room," one of them says.

"She needs to eat." Reaper yanks my arm, moving me closer to him. I stumble into his side as he stops abruptly and turns to face them.

"Not what Commander ordered," the second one says. I don't recognize either of them, but then again, they all look so similar except for the obvious height differences and their eyes and skin tones. He shifts and I catch the faint black glint of the number 51. He's short, but stocky. Nowhere near as large as Reaper. "She's to go to her room."

Reaper drops my arm and faces them fully, placing himself between me and them. He seems to grow as he steps their way, towering over the stocky one, looking down his masked nose at the soldier. "And I am giving you the order to return to your post."

"Our orders are to remain with her," the first one says. The black number on his chest reads 50. "Commander wants eyes on her at all times."

"I have my eye on her," Reaper says, gripping my arm again. He pulls me forward and I go willingly, placing a hand on my ribs to ease the ache as he tugs me along.

We continue down the hall, and I glance over my shoulder and notice they follow, but at a distance.

"I thought you outranked them," I whisper. "Like you were higher on the totem pole."

His eyes cut my way, but he doesn't answer.

When we reach the kitchen, he lets me go and gestures for me to enter first. I do, noting the soldiers entering after us and taking positions on either side of the doorway.

"Outside," Reaper barks at them, pointing to the doorway.

The two men exchange a look and step out, their backs to us, but effectively blocking the door.

Reaper pulls out a chair and deposits me in front of the small table. I sigh in relief. My legs ache and my arms feel like Jell-O from the hours

upon hours of training. He grips my jacket, and pulls my arms free, hanging it on the back of my chair. When I brace a hand on my ribs, Reaper makes a sound I've never heard before. Almost animalistic. Furious.

"It isn't that bad," I say, watching him closely.

I've never seen this side of him. It's as if having their father in the house has unleashed some dark, possessive, and protective thing from inside him. It makes me wonder if he's still plagued with the same thoughts as I am.

What if Fallon had ordered the soldier to pull the trigger? What if I had refused to cooperate?

Reaper adjusts his mask and backs away, then shrugs out of his thin black jacket, and tosses it over the back of another chair. He hits the metal handle of the faucet and removes his gloves, washing his hands. Each movement he makes is stiff, precise, rubbing dish soap between his fingers, then drying them off with a towel.

"What do you want?" he asks, throwing the kitchen towel over his shoulder as he adjusts his mask around his nose.

The question feels so absurd, so out of character, that I laugh. He pulls at his mask, almost awkwardly as he watches me.

"Are you asking me what I want to eat?" I say, sliding a hand over my face. "Or are you asking me what I want to do? Because going home to Cora is at the top of my list."

"Cora is fine," he says, gaze darting to the door.

My heart kicks against my ribs as I sit upright. "Fine?" I ask, carefully lowering my tone. "Fine, and not near Rune, fine? Or away from Zane, fine?"

"Fine and fine," he says.

My breath bursts from my lungs. "Was the arrangement broken?" I whisper.

His subtle nod has me sinking into my chair, tears pricking my eyes. I want to ask more, get every single detail, but without another word, Reaper opens a cabinet and grabs a plate, telling me I'm not going to get more information.

My head spins, sorting through the number of ways the arrangement with Zane could be broken. Unless Zane backed out? God, I hope she didn't do something stupid.

“Have you heard from them?” I whisper, wondering who contacted him. Clyde or Viper or Breaker? I know they’ve been keeping in contact, but I know so few details, it’s infuriating. “Will you please tell me?”

“Not now,” he says gruffly, pulling out boxes of crackers and dried fruits. He grabs cheese and grapes from the fridge and sets them and the plate in a tray. He takes a second to arrange everything, then grabs a glass and fills it with bottled water.

My gaze dips to his ass as he moves, then up his large muscular back to the back of his head. A strange warmth blooms in my chest as I watch him, remembering the day I caught him cooking. How he stormed out, pissed at my mere existence, but now I wonder if that’s what it was, or if he was angry he’d been caught.

Seeing him now, moving around, carefully preparing food for me, I realize it was Reaper who must have made sure we had proper meals and never went hungry. He was the one who made pancakes for us after that night with them. After he made us promises. Claimed us.

I don’t know the significance of it all, but I know I’ve been paying attention to all the wrong things when it comes to him.

I cough, trying to clear the clog in my throat. “You know what sounds good?” I ask. “Spaghetti.”

He pauses briefly, glancing at me, then resumes preparing my tray.

“Or pizza. Or a burger.” That makes him cast another look my way, and my chest squeezes with a sensation I’ve never felt before or even know how to identify.

“A nice greasy one,” I continue. “With Fries. And then cupcakes. And then donuts. God, I miss junk food.” A throaty moan escapes me, and Reaper’s dark eyes meet mine over his shoulder. “Or maybe pancakes. They are Cora’s favorite. I like pancakes too.”

“I know,” he says, but it comes out with a slight grumble as if the thought of ingesting pancakes is too heinous to endure.

The thud of the tray hitting the table as he sets it down feels too loud and too harsh for all the new feelings swirling inside me. I swing my legs underneath the table and place my hands on the top as usual, preparing myself for this ridiculous routine that I refuse to admit I like. It just makes me miss Breaker, and that same warmth blooms again. Brighter. Hotter.

I don’t know what happened, but Cora is safe. She has Breaker and Viper now, and that’s all that matters.

He drags a chair over and sits sideways in it, his thighs framing the back and sides of my chair, his warm inner thigh pressing against my leg. I glance his way, not sure why he's so close, so I ask, "Should I move so you can sit here, or do you plan on sitting on my lap this time?"

"I'd crush you under my weight, little Kitten," he says.

My cheeks heat because I know what it feels like to be under his weight. That smirk he's so good at makes his mask move over his lips, and my heart thrashes as a single thought takes root. Grows.

He keeps pushing me away with cold efficiency, then pulling me close with a desire that nearly flays me. Admitting he cares, then covers it up. It all has me spinning until I think this sensation is me falling. I fear what will happen when I land.

I already care too much.

"You wanted to send me back," I whisper. His body stiffens, and he looks away. I grip the bottom of his mask and tug, so he looks at me again. I like his eyes on me. Dark and hungry and so full of secrets.

"He's cruel," Reaper says. "Worse than you could imagine. He's not supposed to be here. That was the deal we made."

My brow furrows. "You mean when you took us?"

He tugs at the back of his mask, but doesn't answer. My gaze drifts to the thin fabric, tracing the outline of his nose. He's only wearing his mask because I told him to. He's only doing this because he's protecting me. Breaker and Viper left to be with Cora, but Striker and Reaper are here *with* me.

He was going to send me back. He was going to send me away and not complete the mission. Then Fallon returned, and now…

Now, I think he may be just as trapped as I am. They both are.

The more you know about us, the less you'll want to be ours.

That's what he told me, but I think the opposite may be true. The more I know, the more I want them.

Reaper's fingers weave into the hair at the nape of my neck, and he cups the base of my head. He picks up a grape, but I'm so busy staring at him, *seeing* him, that it doesn't register as he presses it against my lips.

When I don't open my mouth, Reaper's brow moves under his mask like he's frowning.

"Tell me," I whisper.

He narrows his eyes. "Tell you what?"

“Who you are.”

“Nothing good,” he says. “I’m death. Born of darkness and vile deeds.”

My chest twinges. He doesn’t feel like death. He no longer feels scary, and now that I have seen, have felt that possessive heat, I know in my gut Cora was right. They aren’t bad. I don’t think they ever were.

“Who told you that?”

“No one, Kitten,” he says. “I was born to be exactly who I am.”

“I don’t believe that. I think someone put that into your head.”

“If you think my father shaped me…” He trails off, the hand with the fruit dropping to his lap, eyes drifting to some memory I know I’ll never be privy to. “You’re not the only one born of tainted blood.”

“What does that mean?” I ask. Part of me wants to rip his mask off to see his expression.

He shakes his head. “Open.”

Frustration weaves a path up my spine. I grip his wrist and bring his hand to my mouth. His focus clears and shifts to me. Those dark eyes I’ve come to like focused solely on me, glaze over as I open for him, leaning forward just enough to wrap my lips around his fingers, sucking them into my mouth as I take the grape.

Reaper’s eyes lock onto my lips. I let his fingers go and he rubs his thumb over my bottom lip. He picks up another grape. I taste the tips of his fingers as I take it and his eyes darken. He lets out a breath that reminds me of that night in my room. Hungry. A little desperate. I relish in the effect I have over him. How he’s letting me see it. Before it was anger and wild lust. Now it's different. Controlled and charged with pure heat but lined with a delicate want.

I chew and swallow. He watches me, his fingers tightening on the nape of my neck. When he doesn’t reach for another grape, I pick one up and pop it into my mouth and wait. He grips the seat of my chair and drags me slightly closer, framing me between his large thighs. The legs of the chair screech along the tile floor so loudly that my eyes fly to the soldiers. They shift but don’t turn to look at us.

Reaper leans in close to my ear. He’s so much larger than me that when he dips his head, I feel swallowed up by his presence. His masked mouth brushes the shell of my ear. “You enjoy testing me, Kitten,” he breathes.

“And I think you like being tested.” I say.

“Dare to risk it again?” he asks. “You may very well end up over my knee.”

I can’t help but smirk.

He swipes my grin away with his thumb. “Such a brat. I should tie you up and spank your little pussy until it’s red and swollen.”

“I think you’d like that too much.”

“So would you,” he says, then makes a light rumbling sound in his throat. “Though I admit hearing you beg makes my cock hard.”

I place my hand on my chest. “Me? I never beg.”

He chuckles. “Little liar,” he whispers. He’s so close, his breath warms my skin even through the mask. “Now open for me.”

My lips part, and he makes a disapproving humming sound.

“No, no, Kitten,” he breathes. “Open those thighs for me.”

Our gazes collide. My heart skips. I glance at the soldiers, but he grips my chin and forces me to look at him.

“Eyes on me,” Reaper says. His hand drops as his other tightens on the back of my neck. It slips between my legs, and he eases my thighs apart. My heart thumps erratically, and my pussy throbs. I keep my eyes locked with his as he brushes the tips of his fingers over me, caressing between my thighs through the fabric of my leggings. “If I slip my hand inside your panties, will I find you wet?”

I lick my lips, my breathing unsteady. My eyes move to the men’s backs, facing us. They are far enough away that they more than likely can’t hear us whispering, but they could turn around any second. Even though I’m hidden under the table, they would know.

Reaper makes another sound, so I focus back on his dark eyes. He’s so close, even in the dim kitchen I can make out the near-midnight color, the slight creases in the corners.

“What did I say?” he says as his fingers trail up from between my legs, to just under my belly button.

“There’s cameras,” I whisper.

“That only we have access to.” He squeezes my neck. “Now, what did I say?”

“Eyes on you,” I whisper.

One finger, then another, slips under the waistband of my pants and dips beneath my underwear. My breath catches as he moves lower.

“Keep eating.” He nods toward the tray.

With a shaky hand, I grab a grape.

“Open.”

I part my legs wider and open my mouth.

“Bite into it slowly.”

I do as instructed. My teeth cut into the flesh of the fruit as his finger brushes my clit.

“What do you taste?” he asks, his hungry gaze holding mine. That one finger brushes over me again, and I squirm as it dips, gathering wetness. “Tell me, Kitten.”

“Sweetness,” I breathe, my lashes fluttering as he moves in small, light circles. “And something a little tart.”

“That is what you taste like.” He slides a single finger into me. My breath heaves from my lungs. His gaze turns molten. “Sweet. Tart. Absolutely divine.”

Reaper adds a finger and drives them in hard. My eyes close and my head falls back, tilting my hips to meet his hand, starved for him. It’s only been a few days since he’s touched me, and I’m already desperate. That night in my room, he gave me so much, took so much of me when he left, that this hungry, yet soft touch from him feels like he’s giving it back.

His grip tightens on my neck as he drives his fingers in faster, rocking his large palm into my clit each time he drives in.

“Look at me,” he whispers, driving in harder. I turn my head to meet his gaze and grip the table with one hand, my other flying out to grasp his thigh. “I want your eyes on me when you come.”

I rock into his touch, trying to get him deeper. My hand slides almost absentmindedly up his thigh. When I near his crotch, I hesitate, waiting for him to stop me, and when he doesn’t, I glide my hand over the huge bulge in his pants, my body loosening even more.

His eyes seem to lose focus for a second as I grip him, sliding my hand over his hardness, my arousal heightening at the realization he’s letting me. Reaper’s shoulders loosen, and he lets out a low, grating sound. A small whimper slips out of me seeing his reaction to my touch, and I bite my lip, trying to keep another from slipping out.

“Quiet. They’ll hear you. They’ll know my fingers are deep inside you,” he rasps, the idea that they could turn around at any moment bringing me higher. “No whimpering. Hush, Kitten. Don’t make a sound.”

My hips rock, legs widening, allowing him better access. His fingers hook, hitting that place that makes my toes curl and I let out a slightly strangled sound.

“Shh,” he whispers, but it’s just a shaky breath. “Come for me, Delilah.”

The second the command rumbles from him, I fall over without a sound. Teeth clenched, my head falling forward, my eyes fall closed as it washes over me. It’s a delicate release, almost as fragile as my name sounded leaving his lips.

“So beautiful,” he whispers, fingers slowing, and he grips my chin, forcing my eyes on him. “I love watching you break.”

Onyx gaze locked on mine, he pulls his hand free and brings it to his face, my release coating his fingers. Hooking the bottom of his mask with his thumb, he raises it just enough to expose his mouth. Those full lips and two scars come into view, and he twists his wrist, slipping his fingers into his mouth, sliding his tongue between them to lick them clean.

When he’s done, he leans in, and my heart jackhammers. It nearly explodes as his tongue traces my bottom lip and slips inside. It’s not so much a kiss as a flickering of his hot tongue over mine, like he’s letting me sample how I taste. Sweet and tart, mixed with faint spicy darkness. My grip on his cock tightens, and he hisses into my mouth, his hand enclosing over mine, and backs away.

“Don’t tempt me, Delilah,” he grates. “I’ll take you right here on this table.”

My pussy clenches as my eyes dart to the soldiers outside the door.

Reaper clears his throat, and the chair screams across the tile floor as he stands, adjusting himself. “You can finish this in your room,” he says. He snaps his fingers, and the two men turn our way. “Escort her to her room. I’m done with her for now.”

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Chapter 21

Viper

5 years Ago, July, Age 27

THREE DAYS. THAT'S HOW long Rune has had him. Three days is too long to be alone with your enemy. An enemy known for his viciousness and cruelty. Hunter is strong, but I'm not sure he's strong enough to endure what Rune is capable of.

Someone fucking betrayed us.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I rub my temple, pressing my eyes closed as I take a deep breath to calm the chaos in my head. The dripping faucet in the bathroom is making it impossible to relax. I fucking hate that sound. It carries me back to that room, and that fucking clearing, and my thoughts are already too dark and full of nightmares for me to venture there.

"Will you fucking shut that off?" I snap, pointing to the closed bathroom door. My head feels like someone is splitting it in half, and my

vision keeps blurring, like a migraine is going to set in. “I can’t fucking take it anymore.”

Breaker drops the remote and looks over at me from his spot on the bed. “Shut what off? The TV?”

I gesture to the bathroom, and his brows knit. He came in here about thirty minutes ago when I didn’t answer his text, and made himself at home in my hotel room, flicking through the movie channels and ordering us lunch. I didn’t touch it. Eating is impossible. I’m on edge, my nerves a bundle of frayed wires.

I can’t imagine how Reaper must feel. He’s with Striker now, who’s still in the ICU at the regional hospital a few miles away, so that at least keeps him busy.

After we landed in the heli, Fallon had him taken there for surgery. On the chopper, we packed his wound and got him stable enough to take the flight. The dumbass is lucky. Unlucky that the bullet even hit him at such a fucked angle. Lucky he didn’t bleed out, and the bullet didn’t shatter bone when it lodged itself in his body.

Breaker’s injury was clean. Mine too. We both got stitched up, a doctor handed us antibiotics, and Fallon sent us away.

Here, at this hotel on the edge of town, to wait.

Drip, drip, drip.

“Fuck, man. If you’re going to be in here, taking up space, and being all around annoying, then at least have the courtesy to shut the valve all the way,” I yell at Breaker, bolting up from the chair I’ve been sitting in for the last hour and march toward the bathroom. “It’s a five-star hotel. You’d think they’d have good plumbing.”

I shove the bathroom door open and head for the sinks, but stop when I near them. My eyes scan the counter and the double basins, then to the large tub behind me, then over to the walk-in shower, looking for the source, but every faucet is dry.

Fuck.

I rub my temple again; the pain moving from the sides of my head to behind my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Breaker says from behind me.

I catch his eye in the mirror, but say nothing.

“It’s the stress, I’m sure—”

I turn around and stab a finger into his chest, cutting off the words before they can leave his mouth. “Don’t fucking say it,” I hiss. “I’m not fucking crazy.”

“I never said you were,” Breaker says, but the sympathy in his eyes makes my hands ball into a fist, the urge to punch the expression off his stupid, beautiful face making my teeth grind. “I’m just saying—”

I shove past him, not wanting to hear it. That’s why he’s here. He’s worried about me. Yeah, well, I’m worried about Hunter. Breaker didn’t see what I saw all those years ago. He saw the man in the woods that day, tied to a tree and gutted. He saw the level of depravity that is Rune Gavin, but he didn’t see it. Didn’t smell it.

Didn’t hear it.

Not like I did.

Like Hunter did.

We were the unfortunate ones to stumble upon that place soaked in evil.

“Have you heard from Father?” I ask, my voice too sharp as I settle back in my chair.

“No,” Breaker says. I don’t look his way as he sits back on the bed and mutes the TV, but I think that may be worse because now the noise in my head is louder. “He said he’d contact us if he heard anything.”

I nod, returning my gaze to the parking lot outside the window. The low mountain range provides a picturesque backdrop for the small city nestled in the foothills. Our hotel rests on the edge of town, near the national park. The landscape here reminds me of my home county. Lush and green, but not as vibrant. Maybe it’s because whatever evil Rune unleashed in those woods all those years ago seeped into the earth and stained the soil, dulling it.

Outside the window, families pack up their cars, preparing to travel the roads that line the reserve, or set off for a day of adventure on the trails snaking through the forests outside of town. Little do they know that miles and miles beyond, nestled up to the edges of the state park, lies a haunted place, littered with dead bodies and ruined lives.

The place where Hunter is right now.

“He’s working on a plan,” Breaker says, and I sense him moving. He sits across the table from me, but I don’t look his way.

I can’t. He’ll see how terrified I am.

“It’s been three days,” I remind him, though he doesn’t need it.

We’ve sat in this hotel room, ready to move in again at a moment’s notice, but have been given no order to get Hunter back. Father says it’s too risky right now. Even when Reaper screamed and raged, and nearly got us kicked out of this hotel, threatening to go alone, Father told him he would not risk all his sons again. That he and Rune will reach a deal and Hunter will be returned to us.

He just needs time.

But Father never saw what I did. And I never told him.

Hunter doesn’t have time.

“Where do you think they came from?” I ask.

Breaker takes a deep breath. “No clue.”

“There were a lot of soldiers.” I catch his brows lifting and his nod. “Who would have that many? And who would have told Rune we were coming?”

“No fucking clue,” Breaker says.

Behind me, a beeping sound rings through the quiet room, indicating the lock has been disengaged. My gaze collides with Breaker’s, then we’re both moving. I lunge for my gun on the bedside table, and Breaker stands, reaching for his in the holster behind his back. The second the door opens, we’re both ready and aiming, fingers on the trigger.

“Fuck,” I grate when I see Reaper entering the room. He briefly looks at our drawn weapons as he shuts the door, his face devoid of all emotion. “You’re supposed to text me before you come in.”

Reaper glances at my phone on the nightstand and shrugs.

“How is Striker?” Breaker asks. “Has there been a change?”

“He’s stable enough to move,” Reaper says. “The surgeon Father flew in said Striker will be fine.”

“Thank fuck,” Breaker murmurs, returning his gun to its holster and sitting back down. “When do we move him?”

Reaper shrugs, sitting down at the end of the bed. He rubs his jaw, then runs a hand through his hair. He looks strained, far more than I feel, like his skin is stretched too thin. The deep circles under his eyes mean he’s not sleeping. Not that any of us are.

Sitting here and waiting is frustrating. We’re used to waiting for orders, but this is Hunter. This is us.

“Father wants him at home,” Reaper says, rubbing a thumb across the tattoos on his fingers.

“Striker will be pissed,” Breaker says. “He’ll want to be here when Hunter comes home.”

Reaper’s jaw works, but he says nothing. He doesn’t need to. We have no idea when or if Hunter will come home.

“I’ll go back later and sit with Strike,” Breaker says to Reaper. “You need to sleep.”

Reap shakes his head, rubbing his eyes. “He’s sleeping now. I’m going back later so I’m there when he wakes up. I just needed…” He doesn’t say it, but he needed a break.

Breaker glances at me, a worried expression pulling his lips down. We both saw what happened. We both heard. Reaper will not rest until he knows Striker is in the clear, and Hunter is back with us.

“Is Father still at the hospital?” I ask. “Or did he return home?”

Home. If it can be called that. His opulent mansion on the coast was never our home. We were raised in the darkness of that old jail, hundreds of miles from prying eyes, nestled in a cold barren landscape designed to keep secrets, only ever seeing his home on the rare occasion we were invited to stay before a mission.

After we all left the school, we just moved from place to place, city to city, staying in lavish hotels, or hole in the wall places in the middle of nowhere if we needed to lie low after a high-stakes mission. It’s been like that since Breaker turned of age. The only reprieve we have are the dive bars we sometimes stop in, or the large cities where we can pretend to be other people as we pass through. Men who gamble and drink and stay up late partying. Men who take pretty women back to our rooms and fuck until the horrors we committed that day are just faint memories that bleed together until it’s one big nightmare we pretend never happened.

Hunter is the best at that. Picking up women. They trip over themselves to be near him. His dark eyes and alluring smile that could bring an entire nation to its knees make it easy for him. Reaper has the same qualities, though he rarely uses it. Also, he’s such an asshole that women are drawn to him for the wrong reasons.

“—I didn’t order anything,” Breaker says, and I realize I’ve been staring out the window, not even seeing the family with two kids tossing suitcases in their car.

I look over at Breaker, who's pressed against the door, gun drawn, Reaper at his side, his gun aimed at the door as he watches Breaker talk to whoever is on the other side.

"It says room 546," a male says, his voice muffled by the closed door. After a second, he says, "Hold on, there's an envelope."

"For who?" Breaker asks, shifting to place his hand on the doorknob. I catch his eye as I slowly stand, unlocking the safety on my gun and moving to the far wall, peering around the corner to watch.

"The card says it's for Fallon?" the man says, but it's a question. "Do you want me to open it?"

"No," Breaker barks out. He glances at Reaper, who nods, signaling for him to open the door.

I move my finger to the trigger and wait.

The door opens, and Breaker pulls the cart in, thanks the guy, and slams the door in his face. He checks under the cart, then nods when he finds it clear.

I lower my gun, lock the safety, and then gesture to the cart. "What is it?"

Reaper shoves his gun back in its holster, adjusts his leather jacket, eyeing the cart like it's about to explode.

Fuck, for all we know, it may.

"Fallon's name isn't attached to these rooms," I say, though there is no need. Rune has resources just like Fallon. It doesn't matter that we're using aliases. He knows we'd stay close. He has Hunter. He's probably been watching us this entire time, though we've been careful to keep our faces covered, and Breaker messed with the hotel's security cameras just in case.

"Harlow," Reaper says. "I thought I spotted Clyde this morning."

Breaker nods. "Yeah. Me too, last night."

I gesture again to the cart. "What does the card say?"

We all stand around the cart, looking down at the silver tray with the ornate cover and the white card with black lettering on the front, spelling out Fallon Byrns in a neat calligraphy.

After a minute, Reaper snatches the white envelope and rips it open. He reads it, then curses, tossing the card down so violently it bounces off the cart and hits the floor. Breaker picks it up, reads it, then hands it to me, but Reaper is suddenly all movement, pulling the lid off the tray, and when we see what's underneath, Breaker gasps, and I stumble back.

Reaper freezes, hand midair like he was reaching toward it, staring down at the tray.

"What the fuck," Breaker breathes.

Noise pulses in my head.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The scent of wet earth fills my nose, then the rancid smell of death stained with the metallic stench of blood. Then it's gone.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*."

At first I think it's me, cursing over and over, but I realize it's Reaper.

The cover of the tray drops to the carpet with a heavy thud. Reaper's fingers flex, all ten stretching outward, then curling into a fist.

Noise, like rumbling voices, cut through the thumping in my head, and I see Breaker pacing, talking on the phone, but I can't hear what he's saying. It's all garbled, and the only word I can hear is Hunter.

I rip my eyes from the platter and look down at the card in my hand. My hand trembles, making it hard to read, but the words burn through the haze and embed themselves into my brain.

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Reaper says. His hands hover above the cart, shaking as he reaches to grab the pieces on the tray, but stops, turning as rigid as ice. The shaking in his hands ceases; his shoulders square. His features seem to harden, and he looks at me.

"I'm going to kill him," he says, deadly calm. "Rune will fucking pay for this."

I dare a look down at the tray. My stomach roils.

Fingers, ten of them, line the tray, all bearing the same tattoos as Reaper.

Hunter's fingers.

My vision blurs as I read the card again.

"An eye for an eye. Blood for blood."

Rune wants blood, and nothing but destruction will appease a man obsessed with vengeance.

But he doesn't know he now has to contend with Reaper.

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Chapter 22

Delilah

THE SECOND DAY OF training, I'm exhausted as I make the trek to the range. I spent the entire night flickering in and out of sleep, thoughts of Reaper, his touch, his words, leaving me feverish with want.

By the end of practice, it's obvious I'm shit with the small .22 rifle, absolute garbage with the larger semiautomatics, but my little Sig fits perfectly in my palm and I can hit near the center of the target every time.

Fallon says that will do. After all, I'll be in close contact. And if I catch him by surprise, I can end him quickly.

A snap of fingers brings me out of my thoughts, and Reaper catches my eye.

"Focus," he says. "I need you to focus. Keep your eyes on me."

Of course, my face flushes and I swear he smirks.

Reaper motions for me to continue, and we practice in slow motion the many moves Viper taught me last week.

I miss Viper. He's better at instructing than Reaper, and more patient. I also just miss his big hands on me, but then I remember how Fallon watches our every move, and I'm glad I just have these two men to contend with instead of all four. When Reaper actually allows me close enough to stab him, just the brush of his hands sends heat to my cheeks, and I find myself checking to see if Fallon notices.

He does.

Like Reaper, the man misses nothing.

Day three, Striker and I resume our morning run, 57 and 55 following behind. These soldiers don't have names, just the numbers that are on their uniforms, and every time Fallon calls one by their number, my skin crawls at the lack of humanity.

After our run, we go to the range, where I practice shooting until my hands hurt from reloading and I'm shivering from the cold. Fallon tells me I handle the gun well, and I'm fast at reloading. He seems to like that I'm decent with the little Sig and his gentle praise feels genuine.

After practice, I'm allowed to bathe, then I'm taken to a small room in the basement with plain gray walls and only a table and two chairs, reminding me of interrogation rooms in movies. Reaper stands like a quiet, menacing guardian at the door after he closes it, and from the way he keeps his eyes on his father, hand casually on the knife at his hip, I can tell he doesn't enjoy being in this small room with Fallon any more than I do.

We go over a list of things I'm to say upon my return. I don't do well, according to Fallon, and his smile disappears, his features turning sharp and mean. He questions me over and over, making sure I have all the details correct, his hand smacking the table when I say something wrong. By the time he's finished, I'm close to tears from the intensity of his line of questioning, and it's a relief when I'm led back to my room, so no one sees me cry.

I can tell most of the soldiers apart by day four. Creep 57 is shorter than the men, and nowhere near as muscular, with light brows that make me think he's a blonde. These soldiers have no accent, and it's impossible to distinguish what part of the world they are from. Like our men, I can only guess at their heritage based on what little of them I can see.

Days five and six involve shooting practice and reviewing the lodge blueprints. In the dining room, the men spread maps out on the table and test my ability to read the aerial maps, instructing me to name each building and its contents. I learn that the kitchen is located within the main lodge, along with the dining room and large lounge area. The few staff who join the hunts stay in rooms on the ground floor at the back of the lodge. A large building connected by a covered pathway is Rune's rooms and the weapons storage—my primary destination—and the surrounding buildings are separate quarters for the guests.

Fallon has me study the maps, informing Reaper I need a quick instruction in the woods, "just in case". Whatever that means.

After that, I learn a few new defensive fighting techniques from Striker, and we practice them until sundown. Like how to break free of a hold and how to take down an enemy quickly. I can't do either by the time we have to head to the shooting range on day seven, but it's obvious I'm improving. Not just with my aim, but with my defensive and attack maneuvers. I stabbed Striker in his groin with my training knife, and he cursed and fell to his knees. Fallon liked that and made it quite clear by the way he smiled at me and petted my head.

Some days, most days, I blank out enough so that I don't think about what I'm training for. I move on autopilot, doing everything as asked, shoving all emotions and thoughts down so deep that I become numb.

Every second of the day is consumed with their revenge, but it's the nights that wreak havoc on my mind. Doubt creeps in after sunset. When I'm lying in my bed, my thoughts turn just as dark as the room, and loneliness takes hold. Late at night, after hours of lying awake and alone, I find myself curled into a ball on the bathroom floor so no one can see me on the camera as terror floods my bloodstream.

I'm an accountant. Because of my father, brutality and greed shadowed every moment of my life, but they're not a part of me. I rarely saw it, never inflicted it. The only true violence I witnessed was my mother's death and the times Clyde was sent to remind me, and anyone else who dared, I was not to be touched.

Most of me wants Rune dead.

All of me wants revenge, vengeance for Cora, but I never once thought I'd be the one to pull the trigger.

There is a tiny fragment that remains embedded in my heart that wishes he was the man I thought he was. Images of my life flash through my mind as a cruel reminder he's still my father. Graduation and my first day at work. My mother's funeral and his muffled screams from behind his office door, where he hid for days. The day he left for his lodge after he finally resurfaced and stayed for weeks to grieve.

And they don't stop. They swirl through my head, terrorizing me at night.

I remind myself he's hurt Cora. That he raped my best friend. The pain of that knowledge scalds each memory as harsh and as lasting as a brand, and I'm left wishing, wishing, *wishing* I could go back to before I knew so much.

It’s on those nights, when anger doesn’t fire hot enough to burn away the pain, I ache for Striker to return, silently begging him to somehow know that I need to be held. For Reaper to appear at the end of my bed, all arrogance and sensual need. But of course they don’t come.

They can’t.

The ever-watchful eye of their father keeps them away. So I scrounge up memories of them, whispering their promises to myself, speak the words that Cora breathed in my ear at night—*you’re so beautiful, I love you*—knowing deep down I’m losing my mind.

I’ve been taken away from everything I’ve known. Held captive for just over a month by the men that I wish would comfort me. Reassure me and keep me away from the nightmare they have created.

I’ve seen and experienced pain, pleasure, and absolute insanity during the weeks here. I was handed proof that the world I lived in was so much darker than I could ever have guessed. A person doesn’t come out of something like this unscathed.

Part of me knows I’m not coming out of this without scars.

If I come out at all.

Fallon’s constant presence is wearing on me. He’s made it a point to sit in on every training session, studying our interactions as if assessing how they speak to me. How they touch me, which is rare, and how I respond to them. How they respond to him near me or when he touches me. Which is constantly.

Fallon never touches me in a way that feels perverse. It’s always gentle, fatherly even. A pat on my shoulder, petting my head, or squeezing my hand in encouragement. It creates an odd feeling that lingers in my bones. I’ll never forget the sting of the belt on my back. His threat to Striker. His brutal determination to regain power over his sons. But whenever he smiles, or gives me gentle praise, the words settle strangely in my belly. Almost warmly.

Almost.

I know Fallon is anything but. He’s a chameleon, changing colors to suit his needs. This is a man as ruthless as Rune, and every move he makes is calculated.

Including right now.

His cold eyes bore into my back. I roll my shoulders and adjust my stance. My muscles ache and my joints are stiff. Even my fingers hurt. I’ve

been training hard every day this past week, harder than before Fallon came, and my body feels battered and bruised all the way to my bones. I'm slowly adjusting and getting stronger, but I'm drained, physically and mentally.

Training knife up and ready, I circle Reaper in the training room, feeling Fallon's gaze on my back. It's empty except for us, Fallon, and 57 stationed by the door.

I can't stand that man. Every time he comes into my view, he winks, leaving an oily sensation in my gut. Reaper definitely notices 57's blatant and gross flirting, and as each minute ticks by, he's becoming more and more agitated.

And I've learned an agitated Reaper means a short-tempered Reaper.

"No," he snaps, making me flinch. Reaper grabs my wrist, effectively dragging me toward him, and readjusts my hold on the practice knife. "You are small. Your body is weak. Hold it like this for more leverage."

"Thanks for the reminder," I snap back, adjusting my stance and my hold on the knife. I glance over my shoulder at the closed door as I wipe beads of sweat off my forehead, wishing Striker would walk through the door and take over my training. I haven't seen him since this morning. "Where's Striker?"

"Busy," Reaper says, once again readjusting my grip on the knife. "Pay attention."

Sweat trickles down my back. My oversized t-shirt sticks to my skin. The t-shirts appeared after a day of fighting practice when I just wore my old tank top I used to wear with Viper, and Reaper dragged me to my room and ordered me to put on a sweater.

I pull the shirt away from my body, fanning myself as Reaper adjusts my stance, his large hands gripping my hips. On any other day, his tight grip and stern eyes would have me breathless.

Right now, I'm just annoyed.

He takes a step back, angling his body and bringing his knife up, blade out, thumb on the hilt. He's so big. So imposing with his tight black clothes and the melting skull mask. Scarily erotic with large hands and the tattoos on his fingers. My belly flips, remembering those hands on me, those long fingers inside me just last week.

Okay, obviously not annoyed enough.

Focus, Delilah.

Grinding my teeth in irritation, I mimic him. We've sparred on and off during the week, but today has been intense. Like a clock is ticking, and I'm running out of time to learn how to murder and maim.

The images I saw of Rune's hunts flash through my head.

I'm also learning how to defend myself.

Reaper uses his knife to point toward my feet. "Keep your feet shoulder-width apart. Stay vigilant. You're small, but remember what we taught you. Use your enemies' size and weight against them."

"In case you forgot, Rune isn't a large man like you."

"Your father isn't the only threat," Fallon says from behind me. "You will be with a hunting party."

My stomach churns, and I drop my arms as I face him. "I saw the pictures," I remind him. "I saw what they can do. But my task is to get into the safe the day they begin"—I gesture to Reaper—"and give him access to the weapons."

Fallon smiles. "Correct. But what if someone—an enemy—were to find you before Reaper?"

I swallow at the thought.

"How many people will there be?" I ask. No one has told me anything beyond my task. Get into Rune's private quarters, get access to the safe, and kill my father.

Fallon clasps his hands behind his back, gaze flickering to Reaper. "According to the last report from Clyde, there will be five staff on site and seven members. Two wives will join, but will not partake in the hunt, yet will be present for the release."

"The release," I say, but my voice fades. Hunting party. Release. I can put two and two together, and a shiver runs down my spine.

"57," Fallon barks. "Take Reaper's place."

"No," Reaper growls.

57 saunters forward, and I swear he's smirking at Reaper under that all-black mask as he moves up next to me.

"She needs experience with different techniques and styles," Fallon says. "I've been watching you for a week, and you're too careful with her."

Despite the fact that he's talking about knife fighting, my cheeks flame, because Reaper is anything but careful with me.

Except for the afternoon in the kitchen, the men have been very deliberate in the way they've touched me all week. The only time they show me they are still in there and didn't morph back into the hard, cold soldiers who took us is the slight graze of fingers as I'm fed each night.

Fallon gives Reaper a pointed look that makes him step back. Reaper's aggressive and violent possessiveness seeps from his pores as he crosses his arms, onyx eyes laser-focused on us.

57 tosses the training knife from hand to hand, eyes moving from my oversized black shirt to my boots. Malice oozes from him, dark and almost tangible. Assessing him, I take note of his slightly jumpy energy, like a boxer. Everything about him reeks of predatory malice, making me glad Reaper is just feet away.

I'd hate to be alone in a room with this man.

"Remember your training," Fallon says to me. "Your enemy knows your weakness. Rune will use it against you."

Like you do, I think, but keep my focus on 57 as he shifts from one foot to the other, waiting for him to pounce. Because I know he will. He's the type of man who would attack relentlessly. Keep me on the defensive until he can make the killing blow.

Exactly what Reaper's trying to teach me.

I keep my sole focus on him, letting him circle me, my gaze moving from his feet to his shoulders.

Behind me, I hear the creak of the door opening, and my head snaps in that direction. Striker appears, and before he has completely entered the room, a hand grips my neck and my feet sweep out from under me. My back hits the hardwood floor, my head hitting it with a sharp smack. I blink at the sudden impact, meeting 57's eyes as he straddles my chest, one hand still at my throat. I swing, aiming the knife for his neck, but he grips my wrist and slams my arm down to the floor. Pain shoots through my elbow, and I hiss in response.

Reaper's angry growl grates through the room.

"Let her be!" Fallon shouts. "It's her fault she took her eyes off him."

"Gotcha, pretty thing," 57 says. "Now what should I do with you?"

"Fuck you," I snarl.

"Gladly, pretty girl," he says. "Spread those legs and I'll fuck you too."

Fire sears through my veins. With my free hand, I aim for his eyes, but he releases my neck and catches it before I can reach him, smacking my hand to the floor by my head.

Now that my head isn't pinned, I twist and sink my teeth into his forearm. The fabric slips under my bite, so I latch on harder.

"Fucking bitch!" 57 rears his hand back, and I wince, bracing for the hit to my face, as I try to roll. A feral grating sound roars through the room, and 57 is ripped off me.

Clutching my knife, I bolt up from the floor as Striker slams him down, fist making impact with his nose seconds later. I stumble backward, the sick crunching sound of his nose breaking, cutting through Striker's guttural snarl.

"Enough!" Fallon barks.

Striker freezes, fist mid-air, then stands and flexes his bare hand.

A hand braces the back of my neck, and I jump, adrenaline coursing through me, and swing my arm as I turn. My training knife hits hard ribs.

"Ah, fuck," Reaper grates, grabbing my forearm.

I drop the knife, my heart hammering, and place my hand where I stabbed him. "I'm sorry," I whisper in horror.

He covers his hand with mine. "I'm taking her to her room," Reaper says. "She's done for today."

"She needs more practice," Fallon says. "The girl is going to get herself killed and, in turn, my sons."

"I'm okay," I say, stepping back and picking up my knife. I turn to face 57. He staggers as he stands, cupping his face, blood seeping out from under his mask into his palm.

"Take his place," Fallon tells Striker. "And you"—he points to 57—"set your nose and meet me in the study."

Fallon leaves, leaving the door open, and the room grows quiet. 57 glares at Striker, and then marches from the room, the door slamming behind him.

"Are you okay?" Striker asks, stalking toward me. When he reaches for me, I slap his hand away.

"Your father is right," I snap. "You coddle me. That asshole just proved I need more practice."

"She's right," Reaper says to Striker. "She needs to be prepared for…" His voice trails off. "If she's not ready for Rune, he won't hesitate to

kill her, or worse, capture her."

Striker curses and runs a hand over his mask, looking down at his feet.

"Capture?" I ask, my stomach dropping to my toes.

Neither man responds, but they don't have to. Capture. As in, take me, hold me, possibly torture me for information or worse. Like Reaper said, he may be so insanely angry at my betrayal, I could be used in his hunt.

Would he really do that? I hate the answer, so I shove it away and stalk toward the center of the room.

"Come on," I say. "I will not die at the lodge because I didn't train hard enough."

"Are you sure?" Striker asks.

"I'm sure," I say, squaring my shoulders, ignoring the throbbing pain in my head, and placing my feet shoulder-width apart.

"Then, we continue," Reaper says, and I swear he's smirking under that mask. "You think you can handle us both?"

"I have before."

Striker's soft chuckle makes me grin.

"Then we continue, Kitten," Reaper says. "No holding back. We won't be gentle."

I give him a smirk of my own. "You never are."

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Chapter 23

Cora

"I THINK A SEMI-AUTOMATIC IS my second favorite thing to hold," I say, adjusting my aim. When Clyde doesn't respond, I lower the weapon and glance at him. "The first favorite thing I like to hold being co—"

"I fucking get it," Clyde snaps, adjusting his earmuffs before he aims.

"Cocks," I yell, just to make sure he can hear me. "I meant cocks, old man."

Clyde unloads a few rounds into his target, then lowers his weapon, and gestures to me. I grin at his dry expression, and readjust my aim. Releasing a slow, steady breath, I pull the trigger. Bullets spray from the barrel in bursts, making my heart flutter as the target ripples, each shot landing near center. Satisfaction gathers in my belly when I place the rifle down and catch Clyde's approving grin.

I remove my earmuffs and set them on the table next to the gun. We've been practicing all day, and my arms ache. Hell, we've been practicing all week, every minute of the day, from nearly sunup to sundown. I've not been allowed to go to the office, much less be anywhere near Rune, so I have zero information on his activities. But, Clyde has kept me busy, bringing me to his lair every day, saying it's good enough for now since I can't gather intel. My aim has improved, not that I was bad to begin with, and reloading now feels fluid and smooth.

Not that all this will do me any good. It's not like I can stuff a semi-automatic into my purse before leaving for work to keep Rune at bay, but that little Glock 43 might work. If Clyde would ever let me leave his house, that is.

Picking up the Glock, I remove the magazine and reload, snapping it in place and taking aim, but not firing. I feel Clyde's eyes on me, feel the words he's not speaking. The same words that have floated in the air all week. *I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I didn't know.*

Silently, I tell him back, *It's not your fault. I hid it from you. I wanted to protect you too. I wish you had never found out because the haunted look in your eyes kills me every time you look my way.*

I clear my throat, trying to dislodge the pain settling there. "When is the meeting again?" I ask, keeping all those thoughts and silent wishes to myself. "The one—"

"It's a simple meet and greet, and you're not going," Clyde interrupts. "We've already established—"

"I'm not going," I agree. "I'm going to Rune's house while you attend."

"No," Clyde says. "This is just a meeting with a potential client, and you—"

"Can't hide forever," I finish, raising a brow. "Rune will get suspicious if you stay hidden with me in your secret villain lair—"

"For fuck's sake, girl, it's not a lair or a secret and I—"

"And you look like you're trying to keep me away from him—"

"I am."

"And"—I lean forward, tapping my finger to his chin, which earns me a deadly scowl—"if you keep avoiding him, he'll get paranoid. And a paranoid Rune means he'll think I said something to you. Which means we're both dead."

Clyde stalks away, not answering as he hits a button to slide the target toward us. He knows I'm right. We've had this conversation so many times this week, it's redundant and silly at this point.

"I'm too busy protecting you from his enemies to be at his beck and call," Clyde says as he tugs the target close enough to change it out. He slaps mine down on the table before me. "Remember, he thinks one of them fucked up Zane."

“I mean, they did.” I pick up my target, pointing to the center circle riddled with holes. “Look who’s a natural badass?”

Ignoring me, Clyde takes my target and sets it aside. “I’m not going to the meeting. Rune can talk to new clients without me.”

I point to myself since he’s obviously ignoring me. “It’s me. I’m the badass. You said so yourself.”

“I said no such thing.” He reloads his gun, snapping the clip in place with a smack of his palm. “Furthermore, the only way I’m letting you out of my sight is if one of them is around.”

One of them. Viper or Breaker. My stomach does a weird flip, thinking of Viper. It’s been a week since we’ve heard anything from them, but that hasn’t stopped me from thinking about them. About him.

His everything.

And the fact that he may know exactly what my mother did.

I take a deep breath, shoving the thoughts away and refocusing on the target as Clyde slides it back into place. “Furthermore?” I say, glancing his way. “Okay, Poe.”

“It was ‘nevermore’,” he says, placing his handgun down and picking up the automatic I’m pretty sure isn’t legal, and snaps a magazine into place. “Poe said nevermore, not furthermore.”

“Whatever.” I slide my earmuffs back over my ears and yell, “Regardless of who said what, you’re going to that meeting, and I’m going to Rune’s house while you do.”

I don’t hear his response over the sound of the bullets spraying from my gun and hitting the target dead center.

***

One of my best qualities is discretion. Rune can attest to that. I’m great at keeping secrets, lying, and covering up sins. I’m also great at keeping my activities hidden. Now that I know Rune is tracking me via my phone, I turn it off after I climb into the taxi.

When the taxi drops me off a few cars down from the side gate, I hand him a hundred and tell him to wait for twenty minutes and I’ll be back. Instead of going to the front gate, I enter the property through the service entrance. Clyde adjusted the camera angles in a way he promises will keep me from being seen, but there is still the issue of the alarm.

Rune's security system will notify him that someone has disabled the alarm, so, I use the staff code to enter the gate, then take the long dark driveway up to the garage set back from the house where Rune's driver, Conner, lives in the apartment above. From there I walk up the path leading to the back of the house and use the staff code.

Usually, he drops Rune off and if the meeting takes a while, like it should today, he will run errands for him rather than waste time sitting outside. Rune hates waste. And people in his home when he's gone. Which is exactly why I use his code. When Rune gets the alert that a staff member is on the premises, his first thought will be Conner. And I honestly don't care if Rune takes his paranoia out on him. He's worked for Rune for years. Seen my battered body, seen my bruises, taken me back and forth at odd hours, so should he get a bullet to the head, I won't cry about it.

He knows who he works for.

Then again, so do I, but I was never given a choice. Conner was.

The alarm beeps as it disarms, and I shove the kitchen door open and tiptoe inside, even though I know no one is here. With no staff left, the house is empty.

When I see the state of the kitchen, I stop dead in my tracks. I scan the large open space, taking in the stack of dirty dishes lined up along the counter, the food left out, the takeout cartons on the center island. With no one here to tend to him, Rune is falling apart.

An odd twinge squeezes my heart. I never thought about how much I pity him. And confusing pity with affection is dangerous. Worse than mixing up potential with the reality of who a person is at their core.

Rune is a murderer. A rapist. A thief. He's every bad thing you could cram into a person. But he was also my caretaker. My second father in many ways. My champion when the girls at school dared pick on me. And all that affection is now tangled up with fear. He cared for me yet…

He didn't.

I shake my head, trying to keep the thoughts from taking root. You can't be a savior and a monster. Not unless he was being the monster to save me, and he never once was.

Breaker was. He was a brute force. He was the villain, and he did it for me. Maybe for a little of his pleasure too, but he did it for me. And I know, down to my bones, he would never hurt me. He'd set himself on fire before he did. And Viper.

Viper.

Reaper. Striker. Delly.

Delly.

I shoot forward, stalking down the hall towards Rune's office. I'm here for one purpose, and that's digging into as many of Rune's secrets as possible while he's distracted.

At his office door, I look over my shoulder, my skin pricking. Even though I know there is no one here, I can't help but feel like I'm being watched.

Thinking back, I don't know if I've ever been alone in this house. There was always staff—Clyde, house cleaners, Claudia baking in the kitchen, that weird guy who did the yardwork—or security guards positioned around even when Rune wasn't home. Growing up, Delly and I were never alone.

My nerves skitter as I shut the office door behind me. I glance around the room trying to figure out where to start. Rune left the small table lamp on his desk on, washing the large office in a buttery glow, and giving off just enough light to make out the stack of papers on his desk. I go for them first, since I know they must have come straight from the office.

Not having his two chief accountants means that he's having to rely on our office staff to crunch numbers, which leaves him open to scrutiny. I'm surprised he even agreed to meet a potential client for another sale today since he doesn't have Delly and me there. Then again, Rune has to keep up appearances.

God forbid anyone found out his daughter and adopted daughter were taken and held for weeks. No doubt the few staff there that day, the media, and the police were paid off, and given subtle threats of what would happen should they talk. Especially once he realized who took us.

I doubt he wanted anyone to know that he was taken by surprise, his two daughters stolen from his place of business by his enemy. Any associates or people in the families would know better than to pry. I'm sure the entire office where we work was told that Delly and I went away for a vacation and that Delly was taking an extended leave.

I never thought of asking.

To my right, the old antique clock he keeps on the long console table near the door ticks away, reminding me I'm limited on time. The stack of papers and files shows the usual monthly reports and nothing of value. Not

that I'd think he'd leave anything nefarious out in the open. The drawers in his desk are locked as usual, but when I swipe my hand under the desk, I feel the little compartment where he keeps his key and retrieve it.

One would think after watching him grab it to open the drawer all these years he'd find a better hiding spot. Guess he never thought I'd have the guts to go snooping.

I never had a reason or strong motive before now.

When I slide the thin top drawer open, my stomach dips. A long hunting knife with jagged teeth rests on top of shiny pens and a few paperclips. To think he's had this here, could have drawn it on me at any point, makes me a little lightheaded. I wonder if I'd have known it was here, the times he was too rough with me, if I'd have pulled it out and used it on him.

The answer makes my stomach twist.

Because I think I would have. Desperation and terror make people do crazy things.

I pick the knife up to look at it, and spot a USB drive underneath. Leave it to Rune to have a USB drive instead of saving everything to the cloud. I glance at his laptop and debate looking, but know I'm too short on time, and I need to get out of here and back to Clyde's.

That Clyde is even allowing me out of his sight means that he's trusting me to do exactly as I said. Snoop quickly, then leave and be back before anyone can suspect I'm gone. He must finally realize that if I can keep my sick relationship with Rune a secret, and handle Rune's violent outbursts, then I can handle this.

I reposition the hunting knife back in place and carefully close the drawer, relocking it before moving on. All the other drawers have nothing of value, just old reports, a few compromising ones that detail other families' involvement in some sale. One file has all the names of past and present lodge members, including their personal information and what I can only guess are family members listed as well. My brows knit when I see that along with their info, there's numbers, almost like a point system, as well as a list of money transfers.

I reach for my phone and curse. If I had taken the time to plan this, I would have had Clyde grab one of those little drugstore cameras. Turning my phone on to take pictures of the information means Rune will see I'm here, and that's the last thing I want.

“Damn it,” I whisper, reaching for the notepad on Rune’s desk and grabbing a pen from the wooden pen stand Delly bought him years ago. I jot down the names and as much info as I can, glancing at the clock. I’m running out of time.

When I reach Zane’s name, my stomach tumbles.

Alongside his name, there’s a record of his personal information, plus multiple substantial wire transfers. The same strange tally system is listed, going back almost fifteen years, taking up several pages.

My brows knit, my belly growing oily with a strange unease, but I jot the information down and continue on. As I write the last name of a past member from the list, it dawns on me. I only remember because the day sticks in my brain thanks to Delly. She’d had the stomach flu so bad she was curled up on the bathroom floor and couldn’t go. But I wasn't sick, so Rune made me go with him to keep up appearances. It’s not every day that one of his close friends dies.

We’d gone to the funeral with all the other families, including Zane and his mother. It was a closed casket and so boring that I remember complaining, telling Clyde that I wished I had the stomach flu so I didn’t have to attend. He’d been quiet that day. Even for him.

The memory makes me go back over the list of names, and each one that is still not an active member of his lodge is dead. We’d gone to every single funeral. Granted, it’s only a handful, and after fifteen years, and considering the age of many of them, it’s not surprising that they passed.

I log the information in my head and add little stars next to the ones that have passed away, knowing in my gut it means something. Rune removes people who are a threat, which means there is the potential these men may have discovered something he wanted to keep hidden.

When I finish, I shove the file back in the drawer and move on to the next, but just as my fingers clasp around the file, I hear the distinct chirp of the alarm being disarmed.

My heart slams in my chest, fear spiking through me like a shot straight into my veins. I stuff the paper into my back pocket, and toss the notepad on the desk, shoving the pen back into the stand with a trembling hand.

It’s too fucking soon. He’s supposed to be at the office.

Easing a breath into my lungs, I slide the drawer closed, knowing I only have a minute before he’s entering the office. I turn the lock on the

drawer, picturing Rune walking across the foyer. As I slide my ass up into his office chair, I reach under the desk and pop the compartment open, slipping the key into the little box. The office door opens, and Rune steps in.

I swallow as his gaze lands on me, my stomach twisting, and I think for a millisecond that I may be sick.

Rune pauses in the doorway, his brows turning down. “What are you doing here?”

With my hand still under his desk, I use it to pull the chair forward, then cross my arms as I lean on the glossy top, noting he asked *what* am I doing here. Not what am I *doing*. Here in his office. Alone. Again. Like the day I told him I was refusing to marry Zane. When he reminded me I was his to do with however he pleased.

Think, think, think.

“I thought you wanted to see me,” I say, breathing through the terror building in my chest.

“I never said to meet me today,” Rune says, walking across the room to stand next to me. He places a hand on the back of his large leather office chair, looking down at me, then glances toward the window. He gestures toward them. “Is that your taxi down the street?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Where is Clyde? There is no way he’d head home knowing Rune was returning so soon. He has to realize that I’m still here.

“Yes,” I say. “I knew Conner was with you. I thought you said…” I let the rest of the question die because the only time I would ever take a taxi anywhere was when I was sneaking around. Like I am right now. And he knows it.

He glances around the room, then down at the stack of files, then pins me with a dark look. He knows I’m up to something.

“I came in the back way,” I say. “I wanted to—”

“You wanted to make it up to me.” Rune runs a hand over my hair, and fear sparks in my belly. “For making me angry.”

Blood rushes from my head. A tremble moves through me, settling in my hands, so I clasp them in my lap, biting my lip, trying to stop it from quivering.

Of course he’d jump to that conclusion. That I came here undercover so I could spread my legs for him to make up for angering him.

He leans down and presses his lips to the top of my head. “My pretty girl, I don’t have time.”

I let out a shaky breath, trying not to pass out, not trusting my voice as he pulls me up from his seat. I don’t know how I’d have avoided that one. Any fighting him would leave me with more bruises.

And the men’s plan ruined, because I’m sure Clyde would kill him.

“Besides, I need you fresh,” he says, stepping back. His eyes move over me, and he nods like he’s agreeing with himself. “I think they’ll like you.”

Fresh. The word sticks in my head. Because fucking me means I wouldn’t be fresh. Fucking me means I’m his dirty whore. He knows what he does is vile, yet he does it anyway.

Maybe that’s *why* he does it.

“What do you mean?” I ask. I follow him as he goes to the large wooden cabinet and opens it, pulling out several files. He reads through the first few papers on each one, but I can’t see what’s typed on any of the pages. “Who will like me?”

Ignoring me, Rune stacks a few files on the nearby table. He lifts his chin toward the office door. “Send the taxi driver away. Conner will drop you off at Clyde’s so you can get ready for the meeting this afternoon.” When I don’t move, he lifts a brow. “Go. I’ll meet you at the office tomorrow.”

Stepping back, I nod, then do my best not to run out the door. Paranoia squirms in my belly like maggots as I walk through the front door, then down the drive, mentally going over each of my steps, trying to remember if I put everything back in place.

My nerves are so frayed that my hand shakes as I rush down the street and tell the taxi driver to leave, and by the time I climb into Rune’s SUV, I’m sweating, having convinced myself that he’s going to figure out I was going through his files, that I almost burst into tears when I see Clyde’s car pull up the drive.

“Nevermind,” I tell Conner and hop out, telling myself not to run towards his car. The second he pulls to a stop, I hop in and slam the door. My entire body trembles, and Clyde’s eyes cloud over, all his features sharpening. Right as he’s reaching for his gun and the handle of the car door, I grab his arm and shake my head. “I’m fine.”

Clyde's body eases, and he places his hands on the steering wheel. He rocks his head from side to side, loosening the tension coiled around him, then he puts the car in gear.

"Find anything worth reporting back to Reaper?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Care to explain why every single one of Rune's past lodge members is dead?"

Clyde shakes his head. "Nope."

I sag into the seat, knowing I'll get it out of him, eventually.

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Chapter 24

Cora

THE DIRTIEST PART OF blackmail is one must stoop to their enemy's level in order for it to be successful. Most consider it reprehensible to use blackmail to coerce another, even if they are evil spawns of Satan, like Zane Devin. Even if the reason you're doing it is to keep yourself safe.

The problem with blackmail is that it's not a foolproof form of insurance. I hold a few of Zane's secrets, but he also knows that I'm withholding that information from Rune and using it as leverage.

I know what Zane did. And now he knows what I know.

And it's possible so does Viper. Not that I know for certain. And I can't just outright ask him.

What I know about my mother would ruin everything.

Including Delly.

Zane's grated curse brings me back to my current problem. A late afternoon meeting with two of the men I hate, and one disgusting cheater. Unable to avoid this meeting today, I now sit around the long conference table in the boardroom with Rune, Zane, cheater Dave, and one temperamental Clyde.

I glance at him sitting in the large leather chair beside me and roll my eyes as Zane shouts out another curse, but he's so focused on Zane, and the blonde assistant he's yelling at, that he doesn't notice.

Zane's entire demeanor today screams of entitlement, lined with rage. He's the perfect picture of controlled violence, with sleek blonde hair

and handsome features, all stuffed into a navy business suit and paisley tie. Even the backdrop of sterile gray walls and the large windows overlooking downtown fit his persona. Pretentious, privileged, and arrogantly cruel.

As I watch him sorting through papers with one hand and verbally abusing his assistant until she's cowering at every snarl and aggressive word, I can't feel bad about my lack of morals.

Zane has none.

"It's not fucking here," Zane snaps, his blue eyes burning through her. He smacks the stack of files with his uninjured hand, and she flinches.

"What's not there?" she asks, her gaze moving around the table, landing briefly on Clyde, then Dave, then me.

She's young, maybe even younger than me, with big blue eyes and a friendly face. I don't know her name. Not that it matters. She won't last long at the rate Zane is going.

"The. Fucking. Contract," Zane grinds out through clenched teeth. "I gave you instructions to have the files here for today's meeting."

"There was no note," she says, and when he snatches the file from her hands, she reels back like she's worried he may hit her.

From the head of the table, Rune clears his throat, and Zane runs his palm over his hair, smoothing down invisible fly-aways, regaining his composure. "I told you to prepare me a copy when you sent the contracts."

I raise my hand and clear my throat. "I forwarded the contract, remember?"

That gets Zane's attention, and the assistant slinks out the door as he directs all that volatile irritation toward me. He's such a prick. The delight swirling through me at his deadly glare should make me feel even more morally corrupt, but it doesn't.

I give him a saccharine smile. "If you remember, you sent me a memo about wanting the document sent to"—I shuffle papers pretending to read them—"to Ben Snyder's associates so they could review and sign."

Zane props his only working hand on the edge of the boardroom table, fingers rubbing together like he's imagining strangling me.

I gesture to him. "If I remember correctly, things sort of got out of hand." I smile sweetly, eyeing the arm in the sling that secures his hand to his chest. "And then you had an unfortunate accident."

"God, you're a fucking bitch," he snaps.

“Call her a name again, and you’ll be needing someone to hold your dick while you piss,” Clyde snarls.

I huff out a laugh, but it dies as Rune reaches for my hand. He lifts my hand and presses my knuckles to his lips before letting my hand go. My fingers burn, imaginary acid scalding my flesh, and every one of my nerve endings strains with the effort it takes not to look at Clyde’s reaction.

“Cora,” he says. “Did you send the documents as asked?”

“No, Papa, I couldn’t send the files on the day it was requested.” I clear my throat as I gesture to Zane. “I could not return to the office and—”

“Because you can’t work from home?” Zane snarls. He scoffs. “I swear to god, Rune, she is useless.”

“Enough,” Rune says, voice like ice. “You’re the one who invited trouble—”

“How was this my fault?” Zane yells, lifting his hand in the sling. “I didn’t do a damn thing.”

Rune stands upright, his palm slamming down on the table hard enough to rattle the pitcher of water and row of glasses.

Across the table, Dave leans back in his chair, pretending to look over a file, and next to me, Clyde shifts, but remains quiet. We all do. Rune and Zane rarely clash, but when they do, it’s like a nuclear bomb going off.

“You called things off,” Rune seethes. “First, we forced his hand, then you spat in his face.”

Zane laughs. “He took her, Rune. How is demanding he abide by the code forcing his hand?”

“It’s a fucking game to him.” Rune slaps the table again as if emphasizing his words. “Every single thing he does is a move on a chessboard. We forced him to return her, and then you canceled the wedding.”

Zane levels him with a cool gaze. “I don’t want a secondhand *whore* as a wife.”

Rune tenses, hands curling into fists. Beside me, Clyde’s anger builds like a storm., turning him tense. I place my hand on his arm, and he shifts, relaxing some.

“That works out well for both of us,” I say, picking up my pen and tapping it on the table. The sharp *clink* drags everyone’s attention my way. “I’d prefer not to marry a man with a tiny dick and only one good hand.”

Zane bolts up from his chair, but Rune casts him a glare that has him sitting back down.

"Contact Snyder," Rune says to him. "Have another meeting. And let him know we're interested in his offer." Right as I'm about to ask what offer he means, he gestures to Dave. "You said his associates are in town?"

My stomach tumbles. Viper.

"One more," Dave says, dropping the file on the table, looking bored despite the fact Zane is boiling in the seat next to him.

"They aren't all here?" Clyde asks. "What's the point of a meeting if we can't speak to them all at once?"

Dave shakes his head. "The other one, Steele, is traveling. Spain, I think?" He shrugs, resting an elbow on the armrest and reclining back. "I don't remember when he's supposed to be back in the States."

Striker's face flashes in my mind. *Does Reaper join them?* I try to recall the names from the files when we bought the hotel chain, but I come up blank. There are only three partners in the group. Breaker said they, but never specified who.

"Contact them," Rune says, dragging me from my thoughts. I look his way. He meets my eyes briefly before saying to Zane, "Did they mention if they brought the samples?"

He raises his cast. "I've been out of commission for the last week, so I have had no communication."

"I can find out and set up a meeting," Dave offers.

Rune nods, gathering his papers and then says to Clyde, "Continue to keep Cora at your side. Now that word is out the agreement is off, I'll be making a new offer. So until it's accepted, I don't want him thinking he can use her as leverage again."

New offer?

And because I can't help myself, I say out loud, "What new offer?"

Rune ignores me and motions for everyone to leave the room. When I stand, he says, "No. Cora, you stay."

Clyde tenses next to me, but shakes it off before anyone else notices. He taps the glossy table surface. "Don't leave the building, Cora. I'm tired of chasing your ass around."

I watch his back as he leaves, and the second the door closes behind him, Rune lets out a heavy sigh.

"Finally," he says. "Now we can talk."

Talk. My stomach clenches, shards of ice cutting through me. Rune fucked me once in this room, and I wouldn't put it past him to attempt it now. Especially since he feels like he's owed. But Clyde is right outside the door, so that can't be why he wants me alone.

"I want you at the meeting." He leans over, bracing his hands on the conference table, watching me. Like he's waiting for my reaction.

"Do you mean the meeting with the Snyder Group?" I ask, keeping my expression blank.

"He'll like you," Rune says rather than answering my question. "And since I need what he has, you'll do everything he wants."

I need you fresh.

I think he'll like you.

"You—" I let out a small laugh, leaning back in my seat. "You want me to join the meeting and do what, exactly?"

Rune's blue eyes drift down my body and stop on the space between my thighs, hidden by my skirt. "Whatever he wants."

My cheeks heat as a combination of fury and disbelief blast through me. I stand up, slapping my pen down on the table. "Say it." I snap. "You're asking me to go to the meeting with those men, and do what, *Papa*?"

Rune runs a hand down his blue tie, adjusting it. "If he wants to fuck you over the railing of my club for everyone to see, you'll pull up your skirt with a smile" He moves in close. "If he, if *they*, want their dicks sucked while they settle the deal with Zane, you'll fall to your knees, mouth open."

I take a step back, my face burning as hot as if he'd slapped me.

Just when I think he can't get worse, he does.

"You fucked up my deal with Zane." Rune drags a finger along my jaw. "You hold shares in my company. Do everything I say, or you'll find yourself in the same position as your mother."

The air leaves my lungs. My knees give, and I grip the back of the chair to stay upright.

Rune has done terrible things to me, but he's never threatened my life.

He steps close, gripping my chin, and the scent of his cologne makes my stomach roil. When his lips brush mine, my heart nearly explodes. I jerk out of his grasp, slapping his hand away, fighting tears, hating that I'm forced once again to bend to his will.

“That’s my girl,” he whispers, then lets me go and walks out of the room. The door closes behind him with a quiet click.

I wrap my arms around my middle, bending at the waist, taking deep breaths. I don’t know why he keeps shocking me. Rune’s used me to sate his greed my entire life. I mean nothing to him.

“What did he say?” Clyde’s voice pulls me back from the brink. “He’s doing it, isn’t he?”

I stand upright, gathering files and stuffing them into my bag, glaring at him across the long table.

“So you knew Rune would use my pussy in a business deal?” I ask, shouldering my bag and stalking toward the door. “I’m not a fucking bartering tool, Clyde.”

“That’s exactly what you are, and you know it.” His words make me pause.

I stop, my hand on the knob, and point at Clyde. “You need to learn how to warn a girl before she’s sold to the highest bidder.”

“Could be worse,” Clyde says. “You could still be stuck with Zane.”

My “fuck you” gets muffled by the slam of the boardroom door.

The irony.

Rune’s whoring me out to the men I want to be with.

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Chapter 25

Viper

I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE sick of looking at Breaker's face, but after a week of being stuck by his side day in and day out, I'm ready to shove him over the side of this high-rise. Instead of sitting in this chair, in this restaurant, atop this overpriced hotel, eating miniature portions of food on stark white plates drizzled in colorful sauces, I want to be doing something. Taking action. But we're stuck in limbo. Waiting.

On Zane-fucking-Devin to get back to us on our offer.

In the last week, we've had no contact with Reap and only a few encrypted messages from Clyde that told us Cora is fine and returning to work today.

Knowing Cora entered that building, knowing Rune was going to be near her, going to possibly touch her, has my insides boiling hot as lava. On top of that, the mission has begun, which means there is zero room for error. We were forced to leave the warehouse, and Ben left the hotel, to move into the private estate the Snyder Group rented for this mission. That means we left all our equipment and surveillance behind, and we can't risk returning. Now we don't have eyes on Cora, and after what Rune did, it's leaving us both on edge.

Well, me.

Breaker seems to have an absurd amount of confidence in Clyde that I don't possess. Then again, he believed Cora's obvious lie that Rune hadn't

violated her. Maybe it's easier for Breaker to cope if he just refuses to see this entire situation for what it is.

A fucking nightmare.

We're so ill-prepared, it's laughable.

To think we spent four years planning this and now that I'm in the middle of it, it feels like a lifetime wouldn't have been enough to prepare us for the level of depravity we're infiltrating.

"We've been here a week, sent Rune the offer, and crickets," I say.

"Taste," Breaker says, ignoring me as he leans across the table to drop a forkful of a weirdly cut vegetable onto my plate. I meet his gaze, and that old, familiar zing shoots through me.

He's dressed like Ben, in slacks and loafers and a white shirt open at the collar to show his smooth chest and the bold black tattoos. A gold ring adorns his pinky, and a thin chain hangs around his neck, contrasting with his dark skin. The man is so dangerously sexy it would be distracting if I wasn't used to being around him.

And I didn't want to throttle him.

He points with his fork at the food. "Try it. You'll like it."

I glare at him across the tabletop laden with various dishes, resentful of how he can act so normal when we are anything but. "I don't want it."

"Stop being a child," he says, "and just try it."

Behind me, shrill laughter scrapes across my brain. The urge to turn around and stab my fork through the offender's neck makes me jab at the vegetable a little too forcefully, and my fork *clinks* loudly on the plate. The two people at the table next to us glance our way. I smile.

Breaker rolls his eyes and leans back in his seat as he sips his water. It was his idea to come here for dinner, so it's his fault that I'm forced to sit still and act polite, which right now I'm incapable of. This entire week has been his idea, so I blame him for my mood. It has sunk to the depths of hell. He's dragged me around town for seven days, hitting up all the trendy hot spots, letting my presence be known as we wait for an invitation to meet with Zane. One that has yet to come.

Not that Zane is fully functional. I know from experience stab wounds hurt like a bitch, compounded by the fact his fingers are broken and it's all on one hand? Zane is probably high as a kite right now.

And more than likely furious.

And a furious Zane is a dangerous Zane.

“—that place with the neon flamingo out front,” Breaker is saying.

I quirk a brow at him and shove the bite into my mouth ungracefully, chewing loudly. He frowns, watching me stab another piece of colorful food on my plate and shovel it into my mouth. Various flavors, sharp and savory, explode on my tongue and I slow down my aggressive chewing.

“Okay, *fine*,” I say around a mouthful, “it’s good.”

Reaper would love this place and all this ridiculous food.

“Why are you acting like this?” Breaker asks, eyes bouncing around the restaurant like he’s checking to see if anyone is watching. They are. I’m being terrible, even by my standards. His gaze lands on me, and irritation flashes across his face. “Did I piss you off somehow?”

“Where do I begin?” I ask. “First you nearly destroy everything by flying off the handle, then you meet with *him* before we’re ready, then you drag me around this fucking nightmare of a city like we’re a married couple on vacation.”

A bark of laughter bursts out of him, and the tension in my shoulders eases. We’re not used to this. Being so… *normal.*

Yes, we spent years moving in Rune’s circle, attending functions, even a few sex parties that left even me feeling a tad scandalized, all designed to grab Rune’s attention. But mostly, we’ve lived a quiet life, moving between missions with little to no contact with any other people outside of hotel attendants and the unfortunate targets we collected or disposed of.

And in the last four years, we’ve barely had any missions. Most of our time was spent watching Delilah and Cora, trying to gain insight into Rune’s daily life. Any time we ventured to a function in Rune’s circle, we did it as a group, with Reaper in the background feeding us info. Even those felt like a mission.

This feels like I’m roleplaying, which I am, but I never expected it to be so *boring*. So claustrophobic, wearing Vince’s suit all the time. It doesn’t help that I don't like the guy. Vince, me, is a total cunt. I’m loud and brazen, flat-out rude, and flirts with anybody who looks my way. And it’s rumored I have a mean streak.

I mean, it’s all true, but *I* at least control myself.

Vince doesn’t. He’s an absolute nightmare of a person.

Ben, on the other hand? He’s sexy and mysterious and, fuck me if Breaker doesn’t fit his role perfectly.

“We don’t have to go to the club,” Breaker says. “I only brought it up because Dave Sobian is a regular and we may run into him.”

“Fuck,” I grate, setting my fork down. I hate it when he’s right. “Fine. We can go to that club with neon lights and the—”

“*Paradis*,” he says. “It means paradise in Fr—”

“I know,” I snap, then lean forward to say, quietly, “We can go to the fucking club, but if we leave without seeing that twat, David, you have to suck my dick when we get back to the house.”

Breaker’s expression flattens, telling me I’m pushing him a tad too far, but I can’t help myself. We’ve never been alone this long. I’m not sure either of us knows how to handle not only the things that have been unlocked since we got our girls, us being so open, but also how to handle no one else around. There are eyes everywhere.

I toss my napkin onto the plate and push the chair back. It screams across the shiny gray stone floor. The people at the table next to us look my way, the small woman with bright red lips looking me up and down. Seems if people find you attractive, you can walk through life acting like a total douchebag and they don’t care.

“Come on,” I tell Breaker. “Let’s get this over with so we can go back to the house and fuck.”

The woman chokes on her bite. I give her a wink as I walk past, heading for the elevator.

***

The club pulses with energy. It’s smaller than most of Rune’s clubs, making the place feel packed with too many bodies. Breaker motions to the cocktail waitress assigned to us and orders another round, even though we have an open bottle of champagne sitting on ice in front of us.

Breaker loves this shit. Expensive food, pretty things, edgy clubs and parties. While I enjoy it, the constant noise and pettiness of this life grates on me after a while. I’d rather be home, fixing up our house, getting my hands dirty. Or traveling and experiencing new places. That’s part of why I never complained about moving from one mission to the next with only hours in between sometimes.

I even enjoyed infiltrating Rune’s circle. The pure rush of knowing we were getting one over on that sick fuck makes my blood sing. But now

so much is at stake. I just want to be home. Away from it all.

I just want quiet. Mostly, I want our girls and all of us together.

“He’s here,” Breaker says, nudging my shoulder. I follow his gaze to the seating area near ours, and my eyes land on him. Purple flashing lights cast the club in an electric glow and turn his dark suit a bright neon. “Wait for him to come to us.”

“I know how to play the game,” I say, widening my legs, taking up more space on the couch as I toss my arm on the back. Like he can feel our presence, Dave’s eyes move in our direction. *Fucking finally*. “When he comes over, let me do the talking.”

“Fine by me,” Breaker says, raising his drink in a silent greeting as Dave raises a hand. “We both know you’re better at this than I am.”

Pretending he means. Funny. I’m not really pretending. I give zero fucks about this guy. Actually, I can’t wait to take him out. He’s a pompous ass, worse than Vince, aka me, and the only thing he’s loyal to is Rune’s money and how well it lines his pocket.

He had the absolute nerve to date Delilah, even when she was so out of his league it was comical. Then he didn’t even give her a proper wedding. He just took her to the courthouse. The day they got married, Reaper nearly had a stroke. He paced a path on the top floor of the warehouse for hours and at one point, it took all of us to convince him not to march into the courthouse and murder Dave.

Accidents happen, he’d said.

It will upset her, Striker had reminded him.

He’s a sick bastard, Reaper muttered and continued his pacing.

That he is. Dave doesn’t partake in Rune’s hunts, not entirely, but he attends them, keeping the attendees entertained with drugs, prostitutes, and sick games, knowing full well what happens. He turns a blind eye, cashes his paycheck, and had the nerve to cheat on one of two of the most beautiful women this world has ever seen.

The fucker needs to go.

And I’ll gladly take him out.

Right as the thought passes through my mind, Dave stands and works his way through the small seating area until he’s right in front of us. He leans forward, offering a hand to Breaker first.

Not that I’m surprised. People tend to see Breaker and nothing else. When they see me, it’s one of two reactions. Fear or lust. Sometimes both.

“Ben Snyder,” he says, raising his voice to be heard above the pulsing music. “Nice to see you again.”

Breaker leans forward, lifting his ass off the couch just enough to be respectful, and shakes Dave’s hand. Dave’s eyes land on me, and he quirks a brow as he extends his hand.

“And you must be…” His voice trails off, waiting for me to fill in the blank. I don’t. He knows exactly who I am. After an awkward few seconds, he says, “Vincent Campbell, right? Ben’s partner in crime?”

I let his words hang in the air for a few heartbeats, then adjust my legs, widening them even more. When I don’t take his hand, he lets it fall to his side.

Dave isn’t a bad looking man. He’s classically handsome, each feature a little too sharp, like a hawk. A little sleazy. Perfect lawyer material. I let my gaze trail over him. He squirms a tad which should give me pleasure, but it just scalds my insides. He’s a fucking weasel, undeserving of the memories he has of our girl.

He knows what Delilah tastes like. The sweet, slightly lavender scent of her hair. The sounds she makes when she comes.

I should stab his eyes out for holding that knowledge. Shove a knife into his ear for ever hearing her pretty whimpers.

He clears his throat when I don’t answer and Breaker says, “One of them. Steele will be here in a few weeks.”

Steele. Striker. He shouldn’t have been allowed to pick his name.

“Right,” Dave says, glancing over his shoulder to the group of women he left. “Zane told me you sent an offer to Rune’s office. He’s going to contact you soon.”

“The offer was sent a week ago,” I say, leaning slightly into my accent. “It has an expiration date.”

Dave winces at my tone. I make sure it’s sharp. Impatient. Exactly how I feel.

“He had a bit of a delay,” Dave says. “But he’ll be in contact soon.”

“Twenty–four hours,” I say.

Dave nods, casting another look over his shoulder. God. The lack of *respect*. Rune and his minions really believe they are above everyone.

I stand, adjusting my slacks, pinning Dave with a glare. He shrinks back. “Tell Rune if he wants to do business with us, I expect someone other than his lawyer.” I lean in, towering over him. “And some respect.”

Dave glances at Breaker, like he’s expecting him to say something, to be polite, but he stands, giving a flash of a smile, and Dave takes another step back. If Rune sent his lawyer to give us a message, it means he isn’t taking us, our deal, or the weapons we provided him with, seriously. That means he may not follow through with the invitation.

We still have to prove we are who we say we are.

We still have to pass his initiation.

Failure isn’t an option.

Looks like Vince will have to put on a show.

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Chapter 26

Viper

LONG RED STRANDS FLOAT in the air like streamers. The sun overhead glistens on each strand until each one looks wet, coated in scarlet.

The wind stops, and the hair now hangs loose.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Red pools below the strands. But instead of damp earth, it's a stone floor.

My eyes travel up the long hair but stop halfway because I know what I'll see if I let my eyes drift higher.

And I don't want to see her face.

There's a distant snap of fingers.

A bird chirps.

I rip my eyes from the red hair and look around.

I'm there.

I spin in the center of the clearing, my heart hammering. I'm surrounded yet again by buildings that seem out of place in the middle of the dark, dense woods. Like this massive opening was cut right into the center, forcing itself to exist here.

This evil place, soaked in blood.

"Come," a voice behind me says.

Confusion makes my heart pound and my hands fist, because it's her *voice, but she's dead. Then I see I'm no longer in the woods.*

I’m in that incense-laden room with candles and too much sin.

“You’ve lived with this sin inside of you for far too long, boy.”

“It’s not a sin to love,” I tell her, but I don’t look at her face. I’m not allowed. I keep my gaze on her feet. On the plain black flats as she removes them.

“Kneel and repent.”

My knees hit the cold stone floor. She’s naked now. Bared to me, but I keep my eyes down as I’ve been taught. When she hooks a finger under my chin, forcing my head back, her touch burns like acid. My eyes land on the hair on her mound. She shifts, and her long brown hair sways around her hips, falling well past her ass.

I reach into my pants to free myself, prayers slipping past my lips in whispers, until they become pained pants.

“Look at me.”

When I do, her features twist, bones contorting and melting under her skin until it’s too agonizing to witness, but when I close my eyes, she demands I open them again.

“Look at what you did to me,” she screams, but it’s inside my head. My eyes open and her lips part in a silent scream. Black liquid oozes out. It spills down her chin, between her breasts, and falls to the floor.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

She bends forward, looming over me like the monster she hides beneath her sweet, soft smile. I open for her, drinking it in, choking on the smoky black as it sticks in my throat.

I can’t swallow it all. I can’t breathe.

I sit up with a gasp, my hand clawing at the clog in my throat. My bedroom door flings open, and Breaker rushes in.

“What the fuck?” Breaker says, hand dropping from the doorknob. He enters the large room I claimed as mine, stopping at the end of the bed. It’s dark in my room, so I can only see his silhouette in the doorway, the pale blue lights from outside the windows washing over his large body. “You were screaming.”

“I’m fine,” I say, tossing back the blanket and sitting up on the side of the bed, my feet planted on the smooth wood floor. “Just a dream.”

“Nightmare?” he asks, the bed dipping as he sits next to me. “It’s been a long time.”

It has. I haven’t had a nightmare in years, especially not one about that evil place.

Or about her.

“Just a weird dream,” I tell him.

He makes a sound in his throat like he doesn’t believe me.

He shouldn’t.

“Do you want me to stay?” he asks after a minute.

I glance over at him, and for a second my breath ceases. In this room, framed by pale moonlight and the white gauzy material draped over the four-poster bed, he’s angelic. So like the boy I sold my soul to protect.

It’s been years since Breaker has come to me in the middle of the night. It’s usually me, feeling disconnected, uncomfortable in my skin, that has me seeking him out after dark. When no one knows, and no one can see I’m not myself.

When no one knows that it’s him I want. His touch. His demands and praises. Everything he’s made of that’s clean and worthy, so I can bask in all that makes him so sweet and good. And for a few moments, I’m those things too.

Just a few moments, though. Because you can’t scrub some stains away.

Ripping my eyes off him, I pinch the bridge of my nose, exasperated with myself and him. I’ve been here seven full days, and we’ve barely talked about anything that really matters. We could blame it on nerves, the inability to chance talking in this massive home where the staff can’t be trusted, even though we sweep for bugs daily, or that we’ve been so busy slipping into our roles, it’s just easier to forget who we were.

I’m not sure if it’s me or him who’s been more silent. That’s not true. It’s me. It always is. I’m the one who puts distance between us. I’m the one who can’t hold anyone close for too long.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Just hate sitting around, waiting. It’s making me antsy. And I don’t like not being able to see Cora.”

My dream flashes through my mind. Rune’s been the cause of so much of her heartbreak. More than the idea of her being anywhere near him, I hate to think about the fact she’s being forced to endure him. Having to face your tormentor every single fucking day wrecks a person.

I would know.

Breaker shifts closer until our thighs touch. The feel of his flesh against mine makes my cock thicken, and considering the dream I had, I know I'm depraved.

Just like I've been told.

I lean forward and rest my elbows on my knees, rubbing my face like I can scrub away not only the dream but all the sudden dark thoughts flooding my system.

"What time is it?" I ask, glancing at my phone but not bothering to pick it up. I've checked it so many times this week, waiting for a message from Reap or Striker, even though I know we're supposed to have no contact with them. Every time there are no new messages, I feel it physically. Not knowing how Delilah is doing just makes everything worse.

"Almost 4 am," he says, sliding backward over my bed until he's sprawled out. "Come here."

My cock hardens fully at his husky tone. My body screams to fall back into bed and lie next to him, but that unsettled feeling lingering from the dream sticks to my bones like tar. Heavy and thick and gross.

Breaker pats the bed, each thump vibrating into me like a quiet invitation. I hesitate. It's not like we haven't done this dozens of times over the last five years. After that night where we let ourselves go, we have spent plenty of time in bed together. Sometimes touching, but more often than not, just keeping each other company like we used to. When Breaker was scared and I was his protector. Before I let that carnal hunger take over.

Now it feels like he's the one who's constantly trying to reassure me.

"Viper," he whispers, and I hear it in his voice. That slightly desperate way he tries to get me to be with him. When he's not edging every word in a command. When he's trying to just exist with me and not use my body for his pleasure.

Too bad that's all I've ever been good for.

"I've missed you," he whispers.

The confession is so fucking *loud* even though it was a quiet release of words. We don't talk to each other like this. Breaker and I don't delve into our emotions. It's always just laughter or chatting, or a quick, hot release.

A handful of times over the years, after we've shared a woman, we let Reaper and Striker watch us together. But most of the time it's in secret, and more often than either of us would ever admit.

He shifts, making the bed jostle. “Talk to me.”

I flash on Striker. How vulnerable he let himself be. How easy it was to let myself be with him. Maybe it’s because he’s just as broken as I am and all our shattered edges fit together. Breaker, I always fear, I’m going to cut him open from all the jagged pieces inside me.

“Tell me,” he says. “What is going on in your head?”

Too much. Always too much.

Breaker sighs and pats the bed again. “Then tell me about your weird dream.”

His neediness cuts like a sharp claw in my lungs. I suck in a breath, filling them, trying to slow down the panic settling in my gut.

“If you wanted your cock sucked, you just have to ask,” I say, sliding toward him. “No need to beg.”

I hear him sigh as I reach for him, my hand skimming over his bare stomach as I move closer. His abs ripple under my touch, but then his hand encloses around my wrist, stopping me before I reach his dick.

“If I wanted your mouth on me, I would have ordered you to your knees.” Breaker releases me, shoving my hand away. “Now lie down and tell me about the dream.”

Panic burns like acid, turning into a slick unease. Breaker rarely rejects me. I can’t even remember the last time he did.

“The wilderness,” I tell him to appease him, lying down next to him with my hands behind my head.

He makes another sound in his throat. He had so many nightmares after we returned, and he didn’t even see the worst of it. But I know he understands. Our time out there, the things we saw, altered us in a way that we’ll never recover from.

“What else?” he asks.

When I don’t answer right away, I hear him shift, feel the bed dip, and suddenly the lamp flicks on and a pale yellow glow floods the room. He looms over me from the side of the bed. I blink at the brightness, looking away from his half-naked body. My already too-aware cock hardens painfully, and being I’m only in boxers, he can see the effect he has on me. It’s all those fucking tattoos. Black lines snaking over his flawless skin, flowing over every muscle like the ink was poured over him, contorting and accentuating his physique.

Adonis. Pure male perfection in my room, wanting me to talk. Divulge my secrets and let him closer.

Fuck that.

“Was it about that school?” he asks, and my eyes dart from the outline of his thick cock hidden by his boxers to his eyes. “The one that burned down?”

I stare at him, my “yes” tucked behind my teeth. He stares back. One black brow lifts as he eyes me. Instead of answering, I reach for his cock. He’s not even hard, but it won’t take me long to get him there. He brushes my hand aside.

“Okay, then,” I say, gripping my hard length through my boxers. “You can suck me off. I’ll go easy on your throat since it’s your first time. Then we can cuddle and talk about our feelings.”

“Why do you do that?” Breaker asks, eyes moving to my hard cock as I palm it. “Turn it into this,”—he gestures to my body—“when you don’t want to talk.”

I give him a pointed look. “Just say you don’t want to suck my dick.”

He sighs heavily, bracing his hands on his hips. He really thinks I’m going to suddenly open up and talk after all these years? To him? The perfect, innocent boy who grew into the man that I’m obsessed with? Striker is easy to talk to. He’s fucked up like me.

Breaker is angelic perfection, and I will not ruin him with my past. So, I do what I do best.

Deflect.

“Too bad Strike isn’t here to suck my dick since you won’t,” I say. “He’s a natural.”

His head twitches, pale eyes blinking at the information. I might as well have sliced him open and shoved the words under his skin with the way he glares at me.

God, why do I do this? It’s always me pushing him away. Always me instigating a fight. It’s me testing boundaries and being an asshole when things feel intense. When I think maybe he’s too close to the truth.

“He sucked…” Breaker’s voice fades and I hear the flash of hurt before he covers it with an aloof smirk. “Too bad he’s not here. Then I could see which one of you sucks cock better.”

My jaw clenches. Jealousy sits like a hungry beast just below the surface of my skin. It’s a double standard, I know, but Breaker is mine. I’m

the only man who has touched him. As much as Striker and I have opened up, the thought of him touching Breaker sends burning fire through my veins.

"We both know I'm the best." I sit up, reaching for him again. He's hard now, but his body is tense. "Years of practice and all."

Breaker swats my hand away then grips himself tauntingly. "I think you forget, you're my little fuckboy to give to whom I please," he grates. "And I'd love to watch your tight ass get fucked until you scream in pain and pleasure." The corners of his lips curl with an arrogant smirk. "Just like you did for me."

The way he says it, like I'm nothing more than something to use, makes my face heat. We fucked *once* five years ago after Hunter's death. But we were both so drunk, so stricken with grief and the ravenous need to feel something other than horror, I barely remember anything beyond the pain of him as he used me.

Then, I could barely meet his eyes the next day. That old familiar feeling had slithered through me when I tried to face him, talk to him, explain why I was so full of shame. And I couldn't.

And he's choosing now to bring it up after we've avoided the topic for years. After that fucking dream that took me back to that room. To *her.*

I stand up, not wanting him to see the shame painted across my face, but he doesn't back away. He moves in closer.

"Come on," Breaker says. "You want my cock so bad, bend over."

"I'm not your fuck toy," I say, shoving him away. He doesn't move. Now he's the one being a dick, hurt by me, which is exactly what I intended.

It's a sick game we play with each other. We've been here a week, avoiding this. Our attraction and refusal to name what we do in the dark. What we do when we share our girls. We've never spoken it out loud. Never voiced whatever this is between us except for late at night, using just heated breaths and his quiet demands to suck his cock. Hell, we've avoided it since that night in the hotel room.

"Just admit you like it," Breaker says and grips my throat, angling his head down so his lips brush my ear. His hot breath fans my neck. "You love being my filthy boy, and you can't stand the thought of anyone touching me."

My breathing shifts, becoming heavier, my cock twitching. *God, I'm fucked up.*

His grip tightens on my throat. His free hand slides down between us, and he slips it under my boxers and grips me roughly. Something twists in my gut. Some dark thing that always blooms under his authority, except this time it slithers around, twisting and turning like serpents.

"Dirty, jealous boy," he grates. "I bet if Striker fell to his knees to suck me off, you'd not be able to help yourself. You'd punch him right in the throat."

Red blurs the corners of my vision, and words come out in a growl, "He doesn't touch you."

A cruel smile plays on his plush lips. Breaker moves in close, crowding me with his sheer size. I don't budge. His chest brushes my bare skin, and the instant surge of electricity that sparks between us goes straight down my spine.

"If you can't control that jealousy, you'll find yourself tied to a chair, and you'll just have to watch him greedily suck my cock. Maybe I'll suck his."

I shove him back, but he keeps my throat gripped in one large hand, his other pumping my hard dick.

"I bet he tastes good," he whispers. "His dick. His mouth."

A smile curls my lip. "His mouth tastes divine," I whisper.

Breaker stiffens, and his grip tightens. "You kissed him?" The words grate out raw, exposing threads of hurt.

He grips the back of my head and spins me. He's so much larger that when he shoves me forward, I stumble from the force, taken by surprise at his sudden brutality.

But I got exactly what I wanted. My words needled under his skin. And now, rage and hurt make him stronger. Faster. Mean as shit.

My face and chest hit the bed, and it shakes from the impact. He pins me to the bed, and Breaker's teeth graze my neck, his hot breath on the side of my face like a demon possessed.

"This fucking mouth is mine," he grates, his cock grinding into my ass. "Fucking *mine*."

I press my palms to the bed and buck him off. He stumbles back, but latches onto my shoulder and shoves me to my knees. They hit with a solid

thud, and pain shoots through them. I grind my teeth, the room fading as images from my past take over.

Cold stone floors. Candles. A tub of water. Soiled towels, no longer white.

"Open," he grates, pulling his cock free. "Look at me. Look at me, filthy boy, and open your fucking mouth."

A tremor runs through my hands, making me press them to my thighs as I clench my jaw. It must be the dream, because I've never had this with him before. Memories or even an ounce of that old fear.

My eyes dart up to meet his. "Fuck you," I hiss.

He narrows his gaze when I don't follow his command. And I won't. Not like this. This isn't him. I thought I'd want him sick with jealousy, but this is a possessiveness grown from hurt.

Breaker commands me because I let him. Because I like him so starved for me, he can't stop himself from demanding I give myself to him, and when he does, I feel the pulsing desire to have me, own me, flowing from him, and I soak it up, ravenous for his love.

But right now, anger and hurt taint every word, every demand lined with something cruel. Breaker is gentle in his dominance. He's safe. The oasis in my anger. The rain to my fire.

Right now he's red rage and green envy, all because the first man I ever willingly kissed was Striker.

Not him.

When I don't do as told, he lets out a vicious growl, one hand tangling in my hair, and my head snaps back. When our eyes lock, I see every ounce of hurt.

He has a right to feel anger. To feel this level of hurt. I've denied him, letting him love and adore me from afar. And to make things worse, I hurt him more by giving the only thing I could have kept just for him to someone else.

I place my hand on his thigh, but the apology refuses to slip past my lips.

"Open," he grates again, chest heaving. He slaps his hard cock against my closed lips. "You want a cock so bad, then choke on this one."

My cock pulses. I grip myself through my pants, trying to ease the pressure building inside. Breaker sees me and kicks my hand away.

“Not until you open that mouth of yours,” he growls. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

My pulse skyrockets, another memory flashing to the forefront of my mind. I shove it down, focusing on his dick. His dark skin and his familiar cedar scent flooding me. But unease creeps through my limbs. Whispers of sin fill my mind. The scent of candles and the stench of vodka, tangling up like a poison.

I shake my head, gripping his thigh as he slaps my mouth with his dick again.

I’m here. Now. Not there.

When I don’t open, he releases his cock and slaps my cheek, just hard enough to sting. “Come on. Open and be my dirty boy.”

My neck heats, flames of humiliation licking up my cheeks. My chest heaves, and I bolt to my feet. He stumbles back, a hand flying to catch himself on the bed rail.

“You want my mouth,” I growl. “You’re going to have to force me.”

I stalk across the room and fling the bedroom door open. It’s early, but the smell of coffee wafts through the house as I head downstairs.

One of the maids, the small girl with a heavy Russian accent, sees me, her eyes falling over my body then landing on my erection. The towels in her hand fall to the floor.

God, why are they up this early? And why does she look terrified? What monsters has this poor girl worked for?

“Tell Stella to prepare breakfast,” I say.

She nods and dashes away, leaving the towels on the floor.

Seeing her reminds me we have to be careful. There is always, *always* someone watching.

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Chapter 27

Viper

15 years ago, September, Age 17

THE TERRAIN CHANGED AS we traveled west, becoming rockier and less dense. The air feels thinner, yet somehow thicker with a humidity we've never encountered before. Yesterday, I noticed the terrain was steeper, which means we're climbing in elevation. We can't be far from the cavern Breaker told us about.

Another slow, steady step, then I bolt between trees, taking me further from my brothers and sending a panicking dread through my gut. I glance over my shoulder to make sure they are following, and my stomach sinks when I don't see them.

My eyes dart about, every rustle of leaves sending a fresh wave of ice down my spine. I can't make out Breaker in the dark woods, and Striker is only the faintest outline in the darkness. I press my back to the large tree, trying to shove down the rising tide of terror.

Dear God, please let them make it out alive. Take me if you must, but please keep them safe.

I curse under my breath. Why do I constantly pray to be saved? The only one capable of saving anyone in these hellish woods is me. Praying does me no good. I have to get us out of here, or at least somewhere safe, so I can figure out what to do next.

It's our second night out here in the wilderness, and we've made it this far. I will fight tooth and nail, kill anything in my path, so we don't end up like that man, gutted and tied to a tree.

The image of what we encountered yesterday flashes through my head. The man's intestines glistening like wet rope in the sunlight, raw bits of flesh from where his arms had been sawed off, covered in black flies.

Bile rises in my throat, and I swallow hard. My fingers curl into fists, nails digging into my palms as I fight the surge of panic.

I have to get us somewhere safe. Someone is out here with a shotgun. Someone killed that man. Tortured him. Who, I'm not entirely sure, but my gut tells me Commander Maxy is involved. Scratch that. I know that bastard has something to do with this. He's the one who drugged us, then dropped us in the middle of this hellscape.

But why? Maxy is a dedicated dog to Father. But he's also been even more volatile this past week. Ever since Reap and Hunter came back from their first mission. Whatever happened on that mission has fucked everyone up. Father's been off too. Quiet, which is not unusual for him, but he's barely come out of his office. Hunter stomps around the school, angry and quiet, more and more like Reaper every day.

Reaper.

Something happened. Something went wrong on that mission.

Stay focused. Reaper's words ring in my head. That's what he always tells Striker when things get too hard to cope with.

Stop floating and focus.

I inhale through my nose, breathing in and out, pressing the back of my head against the tree and glance up at the canopy. Clouds cover the night sky, blocking out the moon and stars. Reaper and Hunter survived this place. Fuck, Hunter killed Seeker to ensure they came out of this alive, and if they can survive all that, I can do this.

I have to.

I glance back at Striker as he creeps between two large trees.

Like the devil himself flicked on a flashlight, the clouds pull back and moonlight spills through the trees, lighting up everything around us in a cool blue-tinted glow.

Fuck.

The sharp boom of the gunshot slices through the stillness of the woods, echoing in my ears. Instinctively, I drop to a crouch, my heart pounding wildly against my ribcage like a terrified rabbit.

Striker drops, flattening his body to the ground, his forehead to the dirt. The moonlight catches the rapid rise and fall of his back. He twists his head just enough to look my way and when our eyes lock, and my throat closes. I scan the gaps between pines. No lanky silhouette.

No Breaker.

Where the fuck is he?

My shoulder scrapes the rough bark as I shift position, leaning out from my cover. The woods shimmer like we're underwater before the clouds swallow the moon and blackness veils the forest.

"Move," I hiss through clenched teeth, waving him over. "Get over here."

Striker shakes his head, but then he braces himself and pushes up slowly from the ground. I immediately notice the way he stumbles when he places pressure on his right foot. Panic flashes through me.

Damn it. He's hurt.

When he attempts to take another step in my direction, his leg gives way, and he nearly collapses back to the ground. I dart away from the tree and grip his arm, tossing it over my shoulder, helping him to the shadow of the tree. Our backs slam against it, chests heaving.

"Fuck," he hisses through clenched teeth.

I crouch and grip his boot. "What did you do?"

"Kinda sprained it while running for my life," he snaps, then hisses when I squeeze the leather boot, assessing the damage to make sure it's just a sprain. "I'll be fine. Where's Breaker? He was right behind me."

I let him go and rise slowly, scanning the dense shadows for any sign of movement. Breaker must be terrified and hiding. I need to find him and get all of us away from whoever keeps shooting at us.

"Stay here," I whisper, peering around the tree. Another blast of a shotgun rings through the woods. I duck, my heart nearly punching through my chest.

Far behind us, a stick cracks, and what sounds like boots thud, but quickly fades. Is someone running away? The person with the shotgun?

“Goddammit,” Striker hisses, and the terror edging his voice mirrors exactly how I feel. He presses his fingers to his eyes. Even in the darkness, I can see the fatigue etched on his face. “We need to find him and get out of here.”

I adjust myself against the tree, trying to slow my breathing, my damp shirt sticking to my back. I’m surprised I can sweat at all. We need water. Bad. I drag my clammy hands over my pants, once again scanning the woods.

I don’t see Breaker at all.

“I think it’s just one person out here,” Striker says.

“More than one person gutted that man,” I say. “But maybe only one has a gun.”

I fucking hope.

Striker grates out a sound as he shifts next to me. “I don’t see him.”

Another shotgun blasts through the woods. My heart gallops in my chest. I grip Striker’s shoulder and drag him with me to the next tree.

“Do you think it’s Maxim?” he asks, “Out here? Doing this?”

“He’s involved somehow,” I say. I turn him to face me, and grip his shoulders. “We can’t be far from the alcove. Can you walk?”

“I’ll manage,” he says.

“You keep heading west like Breaker said. Find that alcove and stay there.”

“And what the fuck are you going to do?” Striker’s voice squeaks as panic heats the last few words, turning them high-pitched and too loud.

I clamp my hand over his mouth. “I’m going to backtrack a little and find Breaker while you move ahead.”

“That’s the worst idea ever,” he says. “We don’t split up.”

“We don’t have a choice,” I snap. “We’re going to end up with gaping holes in our chests if we don’t get moving. And I sure as hell am not leaving Breaker out here.”

Striker rakes a hand over his face. “Okay,” he says. “You’re right. I’ll just slow you down.”

I nod, squeezing his shoulder. “I’ll catch up once I find him.” Leaning over, I reach into my boot to grab my knife and place it in his

palm. “Go straight. Every single tree, leave a gouge knee height so I can track you. Move slowly.”

“Fuck. Okay.” A faint hint of terror threads his voice. “I swear to god you better find him and come back.”

I grip the back of his neck and press my forehead to his, my heart hammering. We’ve been through hell. Our father is a madman. Cruel. Dangerous. We’ve only ever had one another, and we’ve all clung to each other over the years.

I’ll do anything for them.

My lips press to his forehead before I squeeze the back of his neck and let him go. “I’ll find you.”

He gives me one last nod, then turns and limps ahead. I wait until I see him crouching, doing exactly as I asked, cutting a notch in the trunk toward the roots.

With my heart in my throat, I backtrack, darting between the trees, running at full speed, sticks and leaves cracking under my feet. I skid to a stop, my breath coming in ragged gasps, and press my back against a tall pine. My head throbs, the lack of food and water taking a toll on my body. I pinch the bridge of my nose, and peer behind me through the skinny, tangled branches, scanning the shadows for any sign of Striker. The forest seems to swallow him whole, and a knot of worry tightens in my chest.

Did I make the right call in leaving him alone? Should I have had him stay in that spot?

No, I know in my gut we’re close to the cavern Breaker was talking about. Striker will find it, and I will find Breaker.

The image of that man tied to the tree flashes through my mind. I clench my jaw.

I’m going to find Breaker.

Alive.

And when I do, I’m going to fucking strangle him.

***

My tracking skills suck, so every broken limb lying on the ground makes my heart race, thinking Breaker may have gone this way.

Or whoever took him.

It has to be Maxy. But why? To kill him? Is Maxim the one out here gutting people? Does he plan to do that to us?

To Breaker?

Shaking my head to clear the thoughts, I grip my long spear-like stick tighter in my grasp. Carrying a stick won't help me against a gun, but it makes me feel better being armed with something.

My gut twists with each step I take away from where I left Striker. I don't have my knife, but I did my best to mark my path back to him, placing rocks at tree trunks or breaking the low-hanging limbs. Hopefully, it doesn't lead whoever's out here to me. Or him. My throat tightens when I picture him limping, alone in these woods, and I worry I've made the worst mistake of my life.

I'm a liar, a thief. Mean and impatient. God turned his back on me the second my mother was diagnosed with stage four cancer, and I've spent my life cursing Him for cursing me, but I've spent every single moment of this past hour praying we get out of here in one piece.

I glance up at the sky. It bleeds from black to purple, and with the slow rise of the sun, it's easier to see. Easier to be seen too. So I slow down and keep my eyes open as I move through the woods, searching for signs of Breaker. Every snap of a twig, rustle of leaves, whisper of tree limbs rubbing together, sends sparks of fear through my limbs, making my fingers tingle. But I move on because if anyone is going to kill this kid, it's going to be me.

I stop near a tree and drop onto my ass. Fatigue makes my eyelids heavy, and my head swims. I lean back, taking a second to breathe, and search the dirt for a rock or something I can use to mark my path.

That's when I see it. Right around ankle height. Hope zings through my chest, and I scramble to my knees, running my fingers along the groove.

The mark is clean. Precise.

Fresh.

I trace the mark, remembering the winter he taught us all to carve the little makers in the trunks. Whenever we went out to hunt rabbits and small game near the school, Hunter would leave these little cuts to help us find our way back. He said it not only kept us from getting lost, but it helped us to find each other if one of us moved ahead. Hunter is great at tracking. Hunting. Snaring and basically anything to do with the outdoors and staying alive.

While Reaper brings death, Hunter brings life.

My fingertips come away sticky with pine resin. Somewhere nearby, a twig snaps. I freeze, listening. I dig my long stick into the ground, steadying myself before rising as I glance around, a little seed of hope taking root in my chest.

A light fog snakes through the woods, covering everything in a misty dew. In the grayish purple light, I catch a shadow dart between trees, and my pulse quickens. A crunch of leaves and a snap of a twig send my heart into the stratosphere. I spin, the long stick up and ready to stab, but his gloved hand grips it before it can make contact with his abdomen.

“Fuck all,” he says, ripping it from my grasp. “A stick against a gun?”

My breath whooshes from my lungs.

I knew they would come for us.

I stumble forward, wrapping my arms around his neck. I don’t care that he hates being touched. I don’t care if he tries to break my arms for hugging him, I’ve never been so happy to see Reaper in my entire life.

“Get the fuck off, you stink,” he says as he shoves me away.

“How did you find us?” I ask, drinking in the sight of him. His face, muscular body, his haunting black eyes. His uniform. I take a step back, really looking at him. At the all-black uniform, black gloves, gun in hand. He looks like a soldier.

A savior.

I grind my teeth, trying to hold back the tears. The nagging fear, and the days of stress from trying to keep Striker and Breaker alive finally make my knees weak, and I hold on to Reaper’s arm to steady myself. As much as I want to fall apart, I know I can’t.

He gestures to his side. “This kid here.”

As soon as my gaze locks onto those pale eyes, a chaotic swirl of emotions crashes through me. I rush forward and grab Breaker’s collar, not sure if I want to throttle him or hug him, but then I catch sight of the dried blood crusted on his temple, the swollen bruise on his forehead, and the blood staining his pants, and a cold shiver runs down my spine.

“You’re hurt?” I ask, barely able to get the words out. I grab at his clothes, looking for a bullet wound, knowing in the back of my head he’d be dead if he’d been shot, but I can’t seem to think past the sudden noise in my head.

“It’s not my blood,” Breaker says, then touches his head. “Well this is, but not the blood on my clothes.”

“Before you go apeshit, I knocked him out.” Hunter’s voice cuts through the woods as he emerges from behind a nearby tree. “It was easier to carry his scrawny ass than have him making a racket like he was. Running all over like a chicken with its head cut off.”

“You *ran*?” I hiss, my voice a low, dangerous whisper as I shake Breaker. His chin quivers, then he wraps his arms around me in a tight hug, and the tangled knot unravels in my chest.

I take a deep breath, holding him to me, before shoving him back and glancing around. We’re still out here in this nightmare, and now that I have my hands on this kid, I can fully process everything. Reaper and Hunter are here.

Completely geared out.

I take in their outfits, the fatigues, and black boots. The black gaiter Reaper pulled down off his face. The AK in his hands, the knife at his hip, the helmet. Hunter is dressed the same, all the way down to the knife and weapon.

They look like mercenaries.

Real soldiers.

Then again, they are.

And they are here to get us.

And they have water.

I grab the canteen at Reaper’s hip and unscrew it, taking a long pull.

“Easy.” He snatches it from my hands and adjusts it back on his belt, glaring at me. “You’ll make yourself sick if you drink too fast.”

“Where’s Striker?” Hunter asks, leaning sideways to peer past me.

Swiping my lips with the back of my hand, I grimace, but before I can open my mouth, Reaper grips my shirt, pulling me to him. His cool expression turns deadly. “Where the fuck is he?”

“I sent him ahead,” I say, prying his fingers from my shirt. He growls but lets me go. “He has a sprained ankle. I sent him to the cavern you told Breaker about.”

Hunter makes a strange sound in his throat and then says, “Okay. It’s easy to find. How long ago did you leave him?”

He says *leave* like I had a choice. “An hour?” I guess. “He’s leaving markers on every tree so I can find him.”

“Good, he’s smart. I’m sure he’s found it by now,” Hunter says, nodding. “Let’s get Striker, and we should make it to the airfield before sunset.”

“Airfield?” I ask. “You know about the plane?”

“Yes. The airfield where we landed. We circled the area for the first day, looking for you guys, but figured we’d have better luck on foot. Took me a minute, but I was finally able to track you all.” He glances at Reaper. “The airfield is just east of here. Just under a day’s hike. Father flew us in when he realized what Maxim had done. We just didn’t know which direction you went.”

I knew it. That sick bastard has something to do with this. Us in the wilderness unprepared while madmen dismembered people.

“He was the one shooting at us,” Breaker says.

Reaper gestures to the woods behind me. “I nicked him, but he got away. Fucker ran when he realized we were out here. He’s probably back at the lodge by now.”

“He was bleeding good,” Hunter said. “Led us right to Breaker, thank fuck.”

“But why?” I ask, handing Breaker my stick. “Why is he doing this?”

Reaper and Hunter exchange a look.

“Do you know who these people are?” I ask, not liking the silent conversation between them. They always do this and it drives me crazy. “Do you know what they are doing?”

Hunter’s midnight eyes slide to Reap. “Listen, we need to get Striker and get back to the airfield in time for the pickup. There’s a possibility Maxim is still out here.”

“Is he the one who gutted that man?” Breaker asks.

“What man?” Hunter asks.

Breaker looks between the two and shudders. “The one tied to the tree.”

“Gutted?” Hunter asks, frowning. “We didn’t see anybody.”

Reaper curses and looks down at his feet, adjusting his grip on his rifle. He seems to deflate some, a strange expression passing over his face. Remorse?

“They must have cut the body down,” I say. My gut roils at the memory. But why tie him to the tree then move his body? A skittering

sensation moves over my skin, and I grip Breaker's shoulder, grounding myself.

Hunter unsheathes his knife and offers it to me. "Take this. We need to get moving if we're going to make it in time for pickup."

"We aren't leaving her," Reaper snaps.

"Who?" I ask the same moment Hunter jabs him in the chest and grates out, "I'm not risking my brothers to save her."

"Who?" I ask again, stepping between them, forcing Hunter to look at me. "What woman?"

"The one who was screaming," Breaker says. "Reaper says they have her."

My skin grows cold. The red hair tangled in the trees, the distant screams.

"We're not leaving her behind," Reaper says. "I refuse to leave her with him."

"She's probably already dead, or close to it," Hunter says. "If they are out here gutting people, I doubt she's still breathing."

"I'm not taking the chance," Reaper grates. "God knows what he'll do to her."

My gut sours, picturing Maxy's stern face. The scar and the black eyepatch. The man is terrifying. I nudge Hunter. "Who is she?"

"She's the goddamn reason we're in this mess," Hunter says, jabbing at Reaper's chest again. "She made her bed. Let her fucking die in it."

"*Father* is the reason we are here." Reaper slaps Hunter's finger away. "He's the reason we're *all* here."

"Fucking fine." Hunter throws his arms up, then drops them and points at Reaper. "You take Break and go get Strike." He turns to me and takes a deep breath. His jaw flexes, and he shakes his head like he's already regretting this. "You and I will go find that woman. I just sure as shit hope we don't regret it."

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Chapter 28

Delilah

THE MORNING AFTER MY grueling training session with the men, two soldiers I don't recognize guide me toward the west wing. Their heavy boots thud on the worn wood floors, echoing down the halls and through large, empty rooms as we silently wind our way through the house. A heaviness sits in my belly, unsure where they are taking me and why we're breaking routine.

This part of the house is older and more worn down, but there are obvious signs of restoration. Some halls have fresh paint. A few have sanded wood floors ready for fresh varnish. We pass through an enormous sitting room overlooking the woods, with ornate double doors at the far end. In this room, the faded and cracked wallpaper that covers most of the mansion was removed, and large portions of the plaster underneath have been repaired.

The soldier with the number 46 on his uniform gestures toward the tall double doors. I take that as my cue to enter and grip the carved metal knobs. The doors swing open, and a large ballroom comes into view. Dusty chandeliers with hundreds of tiny crystals line the high paneled ceiling from one end to the other. Bright sunlight filters in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, catching the tiny clear beads and spilling muted rainbows along the worn wood floor. Faded murals and peeling wallpaper cover the far wall, broken up by more massive windows.

A cold draft slips up my sweater as I take a step into the room, and I notice several panes of glass in the windows are broken or missing, making the room just as cold as outside.

"Exquisite, is it not?" Fallon's voice echoes around the room, and my heart drops to my feet.

I turn, expecting to find him with the men, but freeze when I see him standing alone behind a long wooden table placed at the far end of the room. The daylight spilling through the massive window at his back casts him in a golden glow. With his three-piece suit and lithe frame, he could pass as distinguished instead of the devil he truly is.

"It's beautiful," I say, taking a cautious step toward him. I glance around, looking for Striker and Reaper, my heart skipping when I realize neither man is here.

Their absence creates a heavy darkness in my chest that feels a little too close to fear. But I refuse to show Fallon fear. He's proven repeatedly that he feeds off it, so I square my shoulders and take a step toward him.

Like he can sense my apprehension, Fallon says, "My sons will not be joining us today."

"Where are they?" I ask, my pulse jumping when I spot several guns laid out in neat rows, along with what looks like a few suppressors.

"Not here," he says, then sweeps his hand over the table. "Today I will show you how to assemble your weapon."

Twisted vines weave through my belly at the thought of being alone with Fallon. Biting back more questions about where my men are, I make my way toward him.

"Respecting a weapon's power means learning how it works," Fallon says, circling the long table to meet me. He points to the spot where he had been standing, indicating I should move to the other side. "Let's begin."

With a glance back at the open doors, I walk around the glossy wood table and stand where Fallon had been. I note the soldiers didn't enter with me, and wonder if they left or if they are stationed outside the doorway. The thought they left and I'm truly alone in a remote part of the house with Fallon sends a slippery unease creeping along my limbs. When I pull my eyes up from the guns to meet his, I catch something pass over his features. Some dark look that resembles the cruel man I witnessed a week ago. He smiles, covering it up, and my nerves ratchet up higher.

He's up to something.

Clasping his hands behind his back, that smile breaks and his face turns cold. “I’m sure I don’t have to remind you, silence is a virtue.”

My heart stutters, and I take a step back, my hands fisting. *Is he threatening me?* An acidic fear swirls with anger, making my head spin.

Fallon unclasps his hands and adjusts his tie. Winter eyes lock with mine. “‘He who guards his mouth preserves his life, but he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.’” Fallon smiles. Cruel to the point of cutting. “Proverbs 13:3. I’m sure you’re familiar with the verse, Ms. Gavin, are you not?”

I unfurl my fists, splaying my fingers, letting the anger slip away. Oily darkness slips over me, but I refuse to flinch at his blatant threat.

“I’m familiar with the verse,” I say, my tone even. Unwavering even as my insides crawl.

“I’m glad we understand one another.” That slick smile returns, and Fallon gestures to the weapons. “Now let’s begin.”

Ripping my eyes off him, I step forward, aware of his presence just as sharply as I was the night in the study.

He’s not above threats, I’m well aware, but this threat not to tell the men about today means he’s up to something like I suspected, and that something will no doubt anger them.

With a deep breath, I focus on the guns and nod.

Fallon steps closer to the table and my heart skips, but settles when his tone turns casual. Almost friendly. “My sons learned to respect a weapon and its capabilities at an early age. Something they should have done with you.”

“How early?” I ask. In some remote part of my brain, I must have known Fallon took part in their training. They lived in a school, grew up there, and learned to be his soldiers. His militant demeanor should have told me he was a huge part of not just their upbringing but turning them into his soldiers.

“Weapons training began at different times depending on the boy,” Fallon says. “Usually between seven and ten.”

His answer takes the breath from my lungs. “How old were they when you adopted them?”

His jaw pops. It appears he doesn’t like all my questions, so I’m surprised when he answers. “They came into my life at different ages.

Striker was five when he came to the school. Viper six, and Breaker was three."

"*Three*?" My voice cracks trying to suppress my scream, and I inhale, trapping air in my lungs before saying, "You took a three-year-old to a military school?"

Fallon props his hands on the edge of the table, leaning forward to pin me with those icy eyes. "I saved those boys from a terrible fate. Their lives would have ended tragically if not for me."

"You truly believe that?" I ask. A tightness winds up in my chest, the same anger that burned through me when I realized Fallon would kill his son to keep control. That he hurts them to maintain order. My vision blurs from the intensity of it as I glare at him. "You believe that by taking young boys and training them to"—I gesture to the table—"to kill and kidnap and god knows what else, you saved them?"

"They were orphans. Tossed aside and alone." Fallon stands upright, a righteous expression turning his handsome features darker. "Despite what you think of me, I love my sons dearly. I rescued them from a system designed to keep them from thriving."

My chest nearly cracks open at the thought of small boys losing their parents and being placed in orphanages. Five is old enough to remember a mother. A father. Viper was six, so he must remember his parents before being orphaned. Did any of them have siblings? Were they separated?

Breaker. His beautiful face flashes in my mind. He was so young. Is Fallon all he has ever known?

"Are you finished with your line of questioning?" Fallon asks, snapping me out of my thoughts. His perfect brow quirks. "May we continue?"

I realize he never mentioned how old Reaper was when he came to the school. I open my mouth, about to ask, but resist the urge to question him further. With a nod, I focus on the weapons.

"We must always ensure the gun is safe before disassembling it." Fallon picks up the Sig and removes the clip, then pulls the slide back, showing me the empty chamber. "As you can see, it's free and clear."

"I see," I say coldly, keeping my eyes locked on the weapon in his hands.

"You're angry," Fallon says.

My gaze snaps to his, and I can't help indignation from staining every word as I spit them out. "I'm angry that you hurt little boys and treat your sons as if they are expendable."

Fallon lowers the weapon to the table. "You love them."

I swallow, looking away, my heart nearly pushing its way through my chest at the word. Love isn't something that's allowed here. Not even in my fantasies, where I imagine staying in this mansion with Cora and the men. Not after everything. There's room for lust, yes. I've allowed myself to feel the fierce protective desire to keep them safe and this need to be near them, taste them, *have* them, but I can't, I *won't* examine what I feel for them. This fucked up, messy ache that clings to my heart when I think of them. I crave them, carry a bone-deep desire to own them, but it couldn't possibly be love.

Love is gentle. Protective. Loyal.

I love Cora.

I'll kill for her.

For them.

I meet his eyes, and his faint smile tells me he knows, even if I refuse to admit it.

"Let's continue, Delilah," he says softly, like he just proved a point without having to say more.

He spends the next several minutes disassembling the Sig, explaining the various components and their functions. Fallon shows me the takedown lever, which releases the slide from the frame. How to remove the recoil assembly and the barrel before he puts it all back together, then takes it apart again.

We continue down the line, while I watch and he leaves them laid out in pieces as we go, while I do my best to tuck the information away.

When we reach the last one on the table, he picks up a suppressor. "This will improve your aim, reduce recoil, and of course, muffle sound." After he takes the weapon apart, he shows me how to put it back together, then screws the suppressor in place.

Instead of picking up the empty magazine on the table, Fallon pulls a clip from his jacket pocket and loads it into the firearm.

"Now we begin," he says.

My brows knit. "Begin?"

He removes a small gold pocket watch from his vest. “We will start with sixty seconds on the clock and reduce it by ten as we go along the line.”

Confusion clouds my thoughts as I look from the watch to the line of disassembled weapons.

Fallon’s sleek black shoe whispers across the wood floor as he takes a step back. My pulse skitters, a strange disquiet winds up in my middle, and every nerve ending snaps into overdrive. My hearing, my vision, my sense of smell, spark with clarity. Fabric rustles in the silent room as he extends his arm holding the gun, and aims for my head. I take a step back, blinking at the end of the barrel. He holds up the stopwatch, his thumb hovering over the top button.

“Sixty-seconds to assemble the weapon before I fire,” he says. His thumb lowers.

The ticking crashes through the silent room.

I stand dumbly, staring at the gun aimed at my face as the seconds tick by.

“Move,” he barks, and I jolt. “Forty-seconds, Delilah.”

I hesitate for a split second, then move on instinct, and snatch up the slide and the barrel. My hands shake so hard, I drop the pieces. Grabbing them again, I take a deep breath, then drop the barrel into place and lock it back. Then I pick up the recoil assembly, but as I try to slip it into place, my sweaty fingers slip and it pops free.

“*Dammit*,” I hiss, the word frayed.

I bite my lip, reminding myself he’s not really going to shoot me, but just as the thought passes through my mind, the clock rings and a quiet *pop* echoes in the room. The distinct sound of glass cracking and then shattering fills my ears. Every single muscle in my body seizes with terror. The scream trapped in my throat nearly chokes me.

“Time’s up,” Fallon says.

I grip the table, barely able to move as my mind processes what just happened.

He shot at me.

No, not *at* me. He purposely shot *past* me.

“You failed to assemble your weapon in time,” he says. “You’re dead.”

Tears prick my eyes.

Fallon uses the gun to gesture to the next weapon. “Continue.”

My body unfreezes one limb at a time as the realization I have to do this again, with less time, leaves a trembling numbness in its wake. My legs wobble as I robotically slide to the next gun.

“You have fifty seconds.” He adjusts the clock and then holds it up again so I can see the face. He presses the button. The hands tick forward. Fear licks a path up my spine, acidic and nearly paralyzing.

“Forty-five,” Fallon says.

I grab the next weapon and begin assembling it, but I’m shaking harder now, my hands slick with sweat. Beads of perspiration slip down the small of my back. I take a breath and focus on the task, trying to block out the sound of the clock and the fact he has a loaded gun aimed at me. I fail on all counts, my whole body trembling.

“Faster,” he barks and then seconds later, “You’re dead.”

The bullet whizzes past my head, and another pane of glass splinters, then shatters. A choked sob escapes, and I drop the pieces of the gun to the table. They clatter and skid off, hitting the floor at his feet.

“There is no room for error,” he says. I meet his eyes, hating he can see how terrified I am. Hating that I’m forced to do this. Be here. In this room. In this fucking nightmare. Fallon holds up the watch. “Again.”

He presses the button, and the clock ticks.

My insides grow cold. *He needs me so he won’t shoot me*. Doubt darkens the thought, lingering in the back of my head as each second ticks by. He would have killed his son.

He could very well kill me.

Grinding my teeth, I snatch up the next slide and angrily drop the barrel into place, locking it in faster than before. Barely thinking, barely able to hear past the pulsing heartbeat in my head, I grab the recoil and line it up with the rails. Right as I’m about to slide it in place, the clock rings. Another bullet shatters a pane of glass in the window behind me. I slam the gun onto the table, tears burning my eyes.

“Fuck you!” My scream crashes through the room.

Fallon lowers the gun and marches forward. I recognize the deadly intent, the hateful gleam in his eyes. Even though the color is so much lighter than Reaper’s, his eyes glimmer with the same hostility. It’s so startling that I stumble back as he stalks around the table. When he reaches me, I attempt to dart away, but he grips the collar of my sweater and raises a

hand, rearing it back. I flinch, waiting for the hit. But he grips my cheeks and pulls me to him. My hands land on his chest.

"You're weak," he seethes, spittle landing on my cheek.

Ripping away, I scream, "And you're a *coward*." That rage that's been bubbling inside breaks free, and I shove at his chest. He doesn't move an inch. "Is this how to train your soldiers? By terrifying them?"

"Fear breeds one of two things," Fallon says, his voice dropping to a cool, even tone. "It either creates the will to survive or it hunts down the weak and swallows them alive."

"And how many of your soldiers ended up with a bullet through their heads?" I grate out, my heart thumping so wildly I can barely breathe. "How many failed to survive you?"

Fallon's eyes narrow. "Those that were removed gave in to fear."

I stumble back at the hidden meaning of his words. They aren't threats, just as Reaper said. He really intended to kill Striker if they continued to disobey. The reality explodes through me, red-hot in my veins.

"They were little *boys*," I shout. My chest heaves with each breath as rage pushes out all logic. I rise onto my tiptoes, my face inches from his, so full of hatred I'm engulfed in flames. "You took little boys and terrified them."

"I turned them into strong soldiers," he says. "I saved them."

Everything I know about the men crashes through my head, thundering and rattling like a freight train. He's insane. Completely sadistic with a fucking savior complex.

"You're *delusional*," I hiss, and the next few words slip out laced with venom. "How many boys have you saved? How many boys have you *killed*?"

Fallon's eyes gleam dangerously. "I knew they failed with you," he says, each word punctuated with pure, uncontained hatred. "I never should have listened to them. They let their feelings cloud their judgement. And now look at you. No self control. Zero discipline. You are useless."

All the fire roiling inside me boils over. The anger at being trapped here, the intense fear that I'm going to mess up and the men will be hurt, the feeling of being so helpless. It all explodes out of me in a chaotic burst.

Taking a step back, I fling my arms out. "Then fucking shoot me! You have at least a dozen other soldiers to send in my place. If I'm so fucking useless, end me!"

Fallon’s jaw pops and he raises the gun, aiming at my chest. My heart rattles my bones. He’s right. Fear breeds bravery or finds weakness. And apparently, stupidity.

Seems I’m the latter.

Stupid beyond measure to dare this killer to end my life.

My heart races wildly, each thud sending torrents of blood whooshing through my head, pounding relentlessly against my skull. I clench my jaw, teeth grinding as I brace myself for it. For the quiet *pop* of the bullet. For the pain as the bullet tears through me, and end this fucking nightmare. *Anything.*

He moves forward, and the barrel digs into my chest. I stop breathing, and we stand, eye to eye, unmoving, unspeaking for what feels like an eternity.

Refusing to back down, I meet his cold gaze. “Do it,” I say between clenched teeth.

Ice-colored eyes bore into me. Then he lowers the gun, setting it carefully on the table. I release a slow, shaky breath, my teeth clenched to keep my chin from trembling.

“You, Delilah Gavin, need to learn better survival skills.” Fallon leans in, so close I can see the faint wrinkles around his eyes, the clean-shaven skin along his strong jaw. “Because Rune Gavin will eat you alive and spit out your bones the second he realizes you lived up to your namesake. And once he’s destroyed you, he’ll tear down all the bloody pillars holding up his castle, not caring who gets crushed within its walls.”

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Chapter 29

Striker

THE METALLIC RATTLE OF the van doors slamming closed cut through the stillness. It's colder and drier today, and my breath mists around my face as I stalk up the drive. The back of my neck pricks, and I turn to find the three soldiers who joined me on today's run, standing around, doing nothing.

"Where do you want the supplies?" 48 asks, gesturing to the boxes of food and household items stacked on the ground. He tugs his mask over his head, eyeing me as I rip mine from my back pocket.

"Kitchen. Help put them away," I say, not hiding my irritation that Father sent me with them, and continue toward the front door.

The errand Father demanded I run, ate up the entire day, and as each hour passed, a sense of desperation wound up in my chest, knowing Reaper had been alone all day.

The low roar of an engine rumbles from behind me. In the fading light, I catch the bright glow of headlights in the distance. My brows knit, and I realize after a second it's Father's black car tearing down the dirt road. The car jolts, hitting a dip, and the undercarriage scrapes against the dirt with a sickening sound.

My stomach lurches.

There is only one person who would dare drive Father's car so recklessly.

When he takes the last turn into the drive, gravel spits up under the tires, the little pinks of the rocks hitting the underside like bullets. The car comes to an abrupt stop, and the door snaps open. Reaper's boot hits the gravel, and he steps out, slamming the car door shut, eyes locked on me.

"Why the fuck aren't you with her?" he shouts, stalking toward me.

"Why the fuck aren't you?" I snap back. "Where were you?"

"Busy being Father's errand boy all damn day," he grates, storming past me.

If I was gone, and Reaper was gone, then Delilah has been alone all day.

With Father.

My heart races as I rush up the stairs behind him, and into the house, dread building with each step.

"He fucking planned this," Reaper says, shoving the front door open.

My thoughts exactly. He purposely sent us both away so he could do god knows what without us interfering.

The second we step into the foyer, Father's voice rings out from the library like he's been waiting for us.

"I'm in here," he calls, voice as sharp as a blade.

Reaper's focus snaps that way, and he stills, shoulders rigid. With a brief glance my way, he storms forward, shoving past me. I follow, hands clenched into fists. When we enter the library, we find Father in the worn armchair, sleeves rolled to the elbows, tie slightly askew, a glass of whisky in one hand.

"You deliberately sent us both away," Reaper snaps, looming over him. "If you harmed her…" his voice fades, leaving the threat unspoken.

"Threats again?" Fallon's lips quirk. "What a possessive creature you've become, Reaper."

I move forward, my gut churning with worry. "Where is she?"

He takes a sip of his scotch but doesn't respond. Instead, he sets the glass down with a decisive clink on the worn table. "You took longer than I expected."

"Your errand took all day, just as you intended," Reaper says, barely holding back a growl. "Next time you can go yourself."

His gaze locks on Reaper, cold and callous. "I don't like your tone, son."

"And I don't like your scheming," Reaper growls. "Where is she?"

“Don’t fret, my sons. Your target remains unharmed. Though I have discovered today she is quite willful.” Father gestures to the doorway behind us. “She’s finishing her meal alone, since you two decided to waste an entire day running an errand that should have taken only a few hours.”

I bite my tongue, refusing to let him rile me. He sent us on runs that took longer than they should have. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had the shipment delayed just to fuck with me. And who knows what wild-goose chase he sent Reaper on. As much as I want to rage, it’s useless. He’s once again made his point.

Father controls this mission now. Not us.

With a rumbling growl, I snatch my mask from my back pocket and pull it on, leaving Father and his fucking mind games and head toward the dining room, with Reaper at my heels. Outside the doorway, two soldiers I don’t recognize guard the room. They must feel the dark energy coming off me, because they step aside without a word.

When I enter, she bolts from the chair, relief melting her face, but she covers it quickly. My gaze travels from her face to her neck, down to her wrists and hands, searching for bruises, marks, any signs of harm. The vise around my chest loosens enough to breathe again when I see she’s unharmed. Tense, yes. A slightly feral look in her eyes, but physically unharmed.

“Any training today?” I ask.

“None. We just talked.” She meets my eyes, then Reaper’s, her mouth a hard line. “That’s all.”

Reaper tugs at his mask, irritation rolling off him in waves. His eyes travel over Delilah’s face, her neck, her collarbone, then dart to me. We both know something happened, and Delilah is refusing to tell us.

My jaw clenches so hard that a dull ache spreads through my temples. I should have seen it when he handed me the supply list. The way Father’s eyes glinted, how his mouth twitched at the corners when he insisted I go personally. I hate myself for leaving, thinking we had the upper hand. For letting him get anywhere near her.

For this fucking hell we’re putting her through.

Behind us, one of the soldiers clears his throat. “Commander wants us to return her to her room.”

“We’re taking her to her room,” Reaper says, eyeing the soldiers outside the door. “You two change shifts with 48 and 55. They will guard

her room tonight.”

With a curt nod, the two leave us, and I glance at Reaper. He lifts his chin toward the door, and I grip her arm, tugging her into the hallway. We need to get Delilah somewhere we can talk to her privately and find out what happened.

Instead of guiding her to the foyer, I turn toward the back of the house. She makes a sound, glancing at me but doesn’t say a word as I guide her forward.

“Music room,” Reaper whispers.

I nod and drag her around the corner, heading toward the music room. Pushing the door open, I shove her through, and Reaper follows, easing the door closed, his back pressed against the door. Without the radiator blasting heat, the draft from the large windows sweeps across the room, hitting my bare hands like ice. The last dregs of daylight leak through the curtains, painting the room with violet shadows. In the center of the room, the piano looms, and my chest squeezes, missing listening to Breaker play late at night.

Missing him.

“What did he do?” Reaper asks, voice low, lined with darkness.

Delilah glances around, then her shoulders drop. “I learned how to reassemble a weapon in sixty seconds or less.”

My gut twists painfully, and disbelief clogs my throat, like I’ve swallowed glass. The image of my first attempt at assembling a weapon is branded in my memory. Father’s cruel smile. His casual indifference. The fucking gun aimed at my head, and the panic and fear that ate at me, terrified I’d die if I failed.

“Fuck,” Reaper grates as he looks my way and pulls her to his chest. Reaper was already in weapons training when Father took me out of the cold room. But I know he must have endured the same training.

We all did.

“I’m going to fucking kill him.” Reaper’s gravelly tone matches the rage cutting through me.

“I’m guessing I learned the same way you did,” she says, turning to face me, but Reaper slides an arm around her waist, keeping her body molded to him.

Just the thought that Father sent us away so he could terrorize her makes my hands shake with a need to destroy. Break bones and tear him

apart. I stalk toward her, my body vibrating with fury, but pause when I hear a burst of laughter and boots thudding in the hallway. My head snaps that way, almost wanting someone to walk in so I can ruin them. But the footsteps fade, and I close the distance, gripping her chin, forcing her eyes on me. Something fierce skitters across her features, barely visible in the low light.

She's so small, so breakable, tucked against Reaper's chest, and just the sight of her makes my ribs feel like they're cracking open, exposing everything I've tried to hide. To deny. Hooking a thumb under my mask, I rip it off. Her breath rushes out, and she cups the back of my neck, pulling me to her.

The second our mouths collide, my knees nearly buckle. It's been a week since I've had my hands on her, and a raw, animal need claws through my veins as I drag my fingers along her collarbone, trace the curve of her shoulder, then slip them to her waist, pulling her closer.

A groan builds in my throat, my cock thickening as her teeth graze my bottom lip, and I press closer, trapping Reaper's arm between us.

"Fuck, I've missed you," I breathe against her lips. Her nails dig into the back of my neck, sending fireworks down my spine, and she angles her head, deepening the kiss. The tip of her tongue traces my lower lip, then pushes past, flooding me with her sweetness.

Reaper's other hand lands on my waist, fingers digging into my hip a fraction. I move in, my boots hitting his, keeping my mouth on hers, caging her in. When my hands glide around to the small of her back, my knuckles hit the bulge in his pants and I break the kiss, my gaze meeting Reaper's. His chest heaves, and he takes in a slow, steady breath.

Delilah squirms, a throaty, troubled sound slipping past her lips. Reaper's fingers dig into my hip, and he dips his head, his masked lips brushing her ear. "*Shh.* Be a good girl and don't make a sound."

Reaper's hand at her waist slips lower, dragging his knuckles over my cock as he gathers her sweater in a fist. I back away, giving him room, and I grip the fabric for him. His fingers dip below the waistband of her leggings, and a small, girlish sound escapes her. I trace the outline of his hand beneath her leggings, feeling his fingers working between her thighs.

A primal, throaty moan grates from him. "She's soaked. Our needy girl wants to be fucked."

She writhes under his touch, head thrown back. I dip, dragging my tongue along the column of her throat, feeling her plea as it leaves her. “Yes, please.”

“Poor Kitten,” Reaper grates. “Our girl has missed us.”

My eyes lock with Reaper’s over her head. We’re all so close that I sense his posture shift, turning predatory. Possessive. Even in the fading purple light, I catch the glint in his onyx eyes, the flash of primitive hunger. Sense his dark dominance rising. It rises in me, scratching at my bones. The need to claim. To taste. To *fuck*.

“Eat her pussy.” Reaper’s order hits my cheek with a hot breath. His hips buck, forcing his hand to drive into my cock. “Show her how much we’ve missed her too.”

My cock pulses, and I grip the waistband of her leggings, ripping them down her thighs as I drop to my knees, exposing her to the cool air. She gasps, hands landing on the top of my head. The cold wood floor bites through the material of my pants as I rest back on my heels, trailing my hand along the little goosebumps forming on her thighs.

It’s dark enough now that I can just barely make out his fingers slipping over her clit. He shifts and hooks two of them into her. The sound she makes is purely animalistic. My palm slides up between her thighs, greedy and rough, and she gasps as I slip my fingers into her with his.

“Oh, fuck,” she breathes, bucking her hips as I drive my fingers in deeper. Faster. My cock throbs against my zipper from feeling her wet heat wrapped tightly around me. From the feel of Reaper’s fingers slipping against mine inside her. I look up and find him watching me. Find her eyes on me. He pumps in harder, then withdraws, fingers coated in wetness, glistening in the violet-hued light, and uses them to open her, exposing her clit.

“Make her come on your tongue.” He’s not asking. It’s an order.

My heart jumps at the demand, and the deep raspy way the words cut through the silence. Familiar. I lean forward, flattening my tongue to her and dragging it up, flicking her clit with the tip before doing it again. The sharp, bright mix of her sweetness with Reaper’s skin goes straight to my cock. Her knees nearly buckle, and I withdraw and catch her, digging my fingers into the backs of her thighs to hold her still.

Reaper’s hand tangles in my hair, and he shoves my face harder against her. “Come on, get in there. Lick her pussy like you own it.”

I grip her ass, pulling her apart, desperate to devour every inch of her. My finger skates over her tight hole, and her reedy moan sends me higher. I do it again, and again, flicking and swirling my tongue on her clit, pressing my finger to her back hole until her whimpers turn frantic.

“That’s it. Get in there,” Reaper growls, voice like gravel. “You know our girl likes it rough.”

I slow down, and suck her clit, capturing it between my teeth just hard enough to make her whine. A carnal, verging on feral sound slips out of her when I release it with a slick *pop*, and Reaper slams his hand over her mouth, then shoves two fingers past her lips.

“Suck,” he grates.

She obeys, sucking them greedily into her mouth, as her fingers weave into my hair with Reaper’s, pulling me closer.

“You want to come, don’t you, Kitten?” Reaper’s voice scrapes out of him, desperate, like an animal straining against chains, seconds from snapping. He bends his knees, angling himself lower, and grinds his cock into the back of my hand. “You want to come on his tongue while I watch?”

Keeping my eyes locked with his, I push against her tight hole, moving myself lower, my jaw straining, and drive my tongue into her. I thrust in and out, fucking her, making my cock pulse with need from her muffled begs. How she grinds against my face, soaking my chin.

“That’s a good girl,” Reaper purrs. He thrusts his hips again, driving her harder onto me. “Ride his face.”

One of Delilah’s hands grasps his forearm, nails biting into his skin, the other gripping my hair by the roots, tugging as she swirls her hips. The door thuds behind him, as Reaper drives his hard cock into my knuckles, forcing her pussy on my face. She lights up, a live wire, her whole body pulsing with need. I withdraw my tongue, and suck her clit roughly into my mouth, and she nearly sobs.

“Be a good little kitty and come for us. Don’t hold back,” he whispers. “He’s been dreaming of this just like I have. Let him taste how desperate you are.”

She writhes wildly as I suck and lick, throwing her head back against his chest. The low light catches the thin pale column of her neck.

I keep my eyes open, drinking in the sight of her above me. From my knees, she’s a vision, all delicate lines and neediness. Power and strength and shameless want.

I let her ass go, and drive two fingers into her, and she shatters.

“Fuck,” Reaper breathes, the back of his head thudding against the door, his chest heaving.

I work her through her release, thrusting my fingers into her, until she releases my hair and shoves me away. Delilah slumps against Reaper, and I shoot up, pulling his fingers free, capturing her mouth, her taste still on my tongue. The proof that she belongs to us.

“I wish I had time to fuck you, Princess,” I breathe, grinding into her, my cock so hard it’s painful.

“Please, yes,” she whispers.

As much as I want to take her right here, with Reaper at her back holding her for me, I know we don’t have time. I grip her leggings and tug them up. Outside the door, boots thud and my heart jackhammers. A muffled voice and an answering laugh make us all still. Cold reality punches me in the gut and crashes through the primal haze, pulling us all back to the current nightmare.

Reaper makes a sound in his throat, like he’s remembering too, and slips out from behind her, adjusting himself. Quickly I adjust her clothes, and smooth down her hair, then let her go, ignoring the hot desire coursing through me.

Hooking a finger under her chin, I force her eyes onto me. In the dark room, they gleam with something that looks and feels too close to desperation, and I press my lips to her forehead. “Today won’t happen again.”

She lets out a slow, steady breath, then slips away. “How many boys were at the school?” she asks.

I exchange a look with Reaper. Even in the dark, I sense his confusion. It’s such a strange question, and such a sharp contrast to what we just did, my brows knit.

“Why?” I ask.

Delilah tugs at her sweater, looking toward the windows and the night sky peeking through the open curtains. She shrugs. “Curious about how many brothers you had.”

Had. She said they talked today and I can’t help but wonder what all Father revealed.

“Five,” Reaper says. “I have only five brothers.”

My heart pangs. Reaper pulls the door open, and dull light floods the room, highlighting her frown.

I run my hand along her back, and she shifts my way. “This will be over soon.”

With a nod, she marches out into the hall. When I meet Reaper’s eyes, I know how untrue it is.

This is just the beginning.

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Chapter 30

Viper

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS AFTER OUR chat with Dave, Breaker and I pull up in the black sedan we rented along with the estate and its staff to the back door of one of Rune's largest nightclubs. The driver climbs out and rushes to my side, but I'm already opening the door and stepping out into the dark alley. The car door slams, and I turn to find Breaker watching me over the roof of the car. He meets my eyes, and for a millisecond I see the same tension that's coursing through me rush over him, before he covers it.

The large metal door at the back of the building swings open, and my shoulders tense. I resist reaching for my gun tucked in its holster at my back as two large security guards wearing black-on-black suits step out.

"Mr. Devin will see you both in the Sapphire Room," the one with striking dark skin and long black dreadlocks says. He gestures to the man next to him with pale skin, shaggy blonde hair, and a long scar down the side of his face. "We will escort you."

I don't recognize either of them as club staff, so they must be new security guards. Breaker told me Rune fired all his security and his personal staff besides his driver out of paranoia, but it seems Zane prefers keeping security around. By the looks of them, I'd say they're from a company and probably more for show than anything.

Guess being attacked in your home and getting your hand demolished would make anyone feel a tad unsafe.

They gesture for us to enter, and I walk through first, Breaker at my heels, into a large room with black damask wallpaper and dull tungsten lights overhead. Techno music pulses through the space, filtering in from the main club at the front of the building like a throbbing heartbeat. Two more security details stand off to the side, both with tanned skin and dark hair, wearing the same black suits and unpleasant expressions. The taller one has a slight feral gleam in his eye that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. My skin itches with a nervous tension as I look around, scanning for hidden threats even though I already know every detail of the building. Where every exit is. Which staff is on duty tonight.

Other than the four large bodyguards, there are no threats. Hell, they aren't even an actual threat, but being in Rune's club creates a slick unease that refuses to leave. It doesn't matter that we planned this for years or that every single move we made was planned precisely to get the desired outcome. That lingering fear of walking into the lion's den makes me worry we missed some minute detail.

"Gentlemen," the shaggy blonde says and motions to the two already in the room. "If you will."

One of them steps forward, intending to pat us down. I shake my head, slowly, glaring at him. "Put a hand on me and lose it."

He eyes the one who is obviously in charge, but takes a step back.

"You two," I point to him and then his buddy, "retrieve the trunk from our car and don't drop it."

They exchange another look with the shaggy blonde, who gives them a nod. They are large men, but from the stiff way they move, I'd say the bulk is for show, rather than actual strength. These muscles were earned at the gym rather than from years of training.

I bet they take gym selfies.

I glance at Breaker next to me, about to say just that, but when our eyes meet, I keep the words in my mouth.

He's already pissed, and we just got here. Then again, he's been pissed all day.

We spoke just briefly after I stormed out of my room, and it was right before we got in the car to go over details. That's it. Breaker spent the entire day in his room, avoiding me. Like *I* was the one at fault. Maybe I was. But he's clutching to his hurt and anger, wearing it like armor, which does nothing but piss *me* off.

I was an asshole, needling him to get a reaction, but he took it a step too far.

Not that he knows my past.

But I can't dwell on that right now. We have bigger problems to face.

Like Zane-fucking-Devin.

Right now, I need to slip into my role as Vince and make sure this meeting goes well. It has to go exactly as planned, or this will never work. I need to play my part to perfection.

I inhale, steeling myself to face the man who took part in killing my brother.

My fingers furl into fists at my sides, letting that old rage, that anger I carried around for years at the injustice of life, wash over me.

Vince is an asshole.

And Zane's about to meet him.

"This way," shaggy blonde hair says, motioning us forward.

"I don't like men I don't know at my back," I say.

He gives me a sideways glare before opening a door and moving ahead with his partner.

We walk down a dark hall, lit only by electric blue light glowing from the sleek, modern sconces lining the black walls. Breaker and I follow the two guards, while the other two carry the small trunk we brought, behind us.

I wasn't kidding. I really don't like them at our back. But I keep quiet, noting the firearms under the other two men's suit jackets. We reach the end of the hall, and the blonde stops at a sleek black door and leans forward to swing it open, then gestures for us to enter.

Here we go.

Years and years of planning, half a lifetime of nightmares, and I'm about to come face-to-face with the motherfucker who is just as sick as Rune.

I take the lead, walking through the door first. The room is dim, with silver wall sconces and ornate black lamps on side tables. A large seating area with plush black furniture and polished black tables sits in the center. Off to the side, there are tables for gambling, a pool table, and a bar taking up the rest of the space.

"Ah, and there they are." His voice scrapes over me like metal teeth, rusted and jagged. "The men of the hour."

The image that's haunted me since that day in the woods takes front and center, and for a second, the fear that crashes through my facade nearly consumes me. It eats up my arms, down my legs, but I take a deep breath and blink it away.

When my eyes find him, I take in his charcoal suit and blood red tie, his sleek shoes, and slicked back hair, and a calm moves through me.

He's just a man. *Killable*. And he's going to die soon.

His blue eyes meet mine, and even from a few feet away I catch the pinprick pupils in his denim eyes. *God, he's high as a kite right now.* Zane moves forward, his good hand outstretched, ready to shake mine, a smarmy smile pulling his thin lips up at the corners.

His arrogance is almost as big as Rune's. But at least Rune is smart enough to be paranoid.

Zane Devin isn't. Even now. With one fucked up hand and our looming threat in the background, he's still too arrogant to be properly scared.

I can't wait to take him down a peg.

I clasp his hand, plastering Vince's smile on my face as I grip his fingers a tad too hard. He drops my hand, and his attention snaps to Breaker.

God, this is going to be glorious to watch.

Breaker takes his hand, that panty-melting smile turning his lips up into a smile so bright I'd be laughing if I could. I know, just *know,* that I see a sliver of smugness in his features as he shakes the man's hand he tortured a week ago.

When their hands drop, Zane gestures to the couches. "I hear we're missing your other associate."

That tightly coiled unease unfurls. I have to remind myself that Breaker did the hardest part already. Met with him, was seen at a function here in town. Spoke to these people and now we just have to pass the rest of Rune's tests to convince him we're on board and trustworthy of joining his lodge.

As of right now, what happens in Rune's lodge is all hearsay. Rumors whispered in certain circles, but were never said outright. We sold him weapons, which isn't unusual with the cover we created, we landed the invite, but now we have to pass the initiation, and gain his trust so that when we're brought into his inner circle completely, we're just as guilty as

him when it’s confirmed he doesn’t hunt wild game or illegal animals let loose in the wilderness around his lodge.

We’re hunting people.

Too bad he doesn’t know we’ll actually be hunting him.

Where he gets his victims, we have no clue. That’s one thing Clyde was never able to find out. He only goes to the lodge occasionally and has always, always kept his mouth shut.

He knows what happens to people who betray Rune.

I do too. We both saw what Rune did that day.

“—in a few weeks. Maybe less.” Breaker’s voice brings me back into focus.

I need to pay attention. Now is not the time to get in my head and let that shit cloud my mind.

I snap my fingers, pointing to the floor by the large round table near the bar. The two men with the trunk set it down and take up positions by the door while the other two, the ones who led us here, sit at the table next to the trunk.

“Heard he’s traveling,” Zane says, unbuttoning his suit jacket with one hand as he sits. We settle down on the leather sofa opposite him, a large black coffee table between us. He reaches for the crystal decanter set in the center of the table on a gold tray and pops the top with his thumb.

Seems he’s getting around just fine with one hand. Maybe I should make it permanent.

“Spain,” Breaker says, leaning forward to take the glass offered. He tilts his glass toward Zane’s arm strapped to his chest with a sling. “What happened?”

Zane glances down at his hand, and smiles. “Accident,” he says. “Fell and broke my hand in several places.”

“Gotta watch those steps after all those martinis,” Breaker says with a wink and a chuckle.

Zane laughs as I take the glass. His gaze drags over me, taking in my black suit, how I lean back and prop my ankle on my knee. How I throw my arm over the back of the couch behind Breaker. He may be high, but he misses nothing, and I swear he catches the comfortable way we sit just a hair too close.

Shit.

I shift, but it just makes my knee hit Breaker's, and Zane notices that too. He notices a little too much, not just the subtle hints we're close—very close—but how I move.

His eyes fly to between my legs. My insides squirm. Zane definitely partakes in sins of the male flesh. That he's having those ideas about me makes me want to bolt from the room and scrub my skin.

"I may have asked before, but when did you three meet?" Zane says, looking at Breaker now. I don't miss when those lingering looks snag on his lips, but when his gaze moves to Breaker's groin, rage zaps through me like a swarm of angry wasps.

My hand fists, nails digging into the palm, my other squeezing my glass tightly. The urge to bolt up, dig my finger into his eye socket, pop out that roaming eyeball and smash it under the heel of my shoe makes my teeth grind.

Breaker not only notices Zane's obvious looks, but he must feel my body tense next to him because he shifts slightly, then casts me a stern glance.

"A few years ago," Breaker says. "We met by chance."

A grating hmm is Zane's reply.

"I sold him a sword," I say, my tone venomous, which rips Zane's lecherous eyes from Breaker, and settles them on me. *Good*. When he gives me another full-body perusal, I revisit the thought of digging his eyes out.

"I hear you're an expert on weapons, Vincent," he says after a minute. "Your specialty being knives."

I tilt my head in agreement. That's my cover story. Vincent Campbell appeared in Rune's circle shortly after Ben, all brash and violent, showing up at fundraisers, tossing money around like confetti. Rumor has it that Vince came from a wealthy family in Scotland. New money that came from selling ancient artifacts on the black market. Then Vince met Ben at one of Rune's associate's gatherings.

When we teamed up, the Snyder Group was formed along with Striker, whose cover is real estate. On the outside, it appears he just throws money our way and helps decide what to buy and sell. Just a pretty face that appears now and then, but being partners with Ben and Vince means he's involved in every decision.

Like who we sell weapons to.

“I see you brought the samples,” Zane says, lifting his chin to the box behind us.

“A few,” I say.

“Before we get to that, I want to make sure you three have all received the contract?” Zane drains his glass, then sets it down with a loud *clink* on the glossy table. “I understand there was a delay.”

“Our office received it,” Breaker says, shifting to lean forward, propping his forearms on his knees. Zane’s eyes move to him, taking in his large hands, the gold cuff links on his black suit. *Him.* “We’ve all signed and sent it back.”

Zane nods. “Good. Once Rune looks over it, we can begin.”

The initiation.

My stomach dips, my mind shifting through the various things we could be asked to do. Breaker said it was pretty straightforward, but my guess is it’s going to be something far more than sitting in a shark cage.

There is no way Rune would require something so tame to prove the lodge member’s loyalty. Extreme wealth buys the depraved a level of secrecy that most people don’t have. He hasn’t managed to do this for fourteen years, and not have securities in place. Clyde told us he was never around for the initiation. It was a private thing between Rune and the requesting members. And there has only been one time the meeting ended badly, and a member was denied.

Meaning he died.

Then, his wife and kids, a week later.

“We can wait for that once your other member is with us,” Zane says, rising from the sofa. “Shall we get down to business?”

Setting my glass down, I unfold myself from my seat, avoiding eye contact with Breaker, and follow Zane toward the table. The blonde holds his hand out for the key. I ignore the gesture, moving into his space, daring him to protest. Breaker lifts the trunk, placing it on the table, glaring at him, and the guard backs away and stands with his partner behind Zane.

Maybe Zane is a tad paranoid.

With Breaker’s help, I lay out a red cloth and display a few of the weapons I brought to entice this sicko. Right as we all sit, one of the guards by the door approaches and leans in, whispering in Zane’s ear.

“Ah, the goods are here,” he says, a wide, slightly oily grin on his face.

Zane pushes back from the table and stands, walking toward the door behind us. The second he can no longer see my face, I cast a worried look in Breaker's direction. His features pinch, unease making his full lips pull into a tight frown.

"Goods?" he mouths, leaning back in his seat and brushing a thumb over the sleek black tie, then casting a quick glance across the table from us.

I shrug, quirking a brow, my mind riffling through the many things Zane could be referring to. When I pitched the offer, it was simple. More weapons in exchange for a fuck-ton of money. Much less than we would usually sell them for, but that's what you do when making business connections.

Behind me, the door opens. My heart nearly explodes.

God, please don't let it be Rune.

I have no idea why I'm praying. God rarely listens to me.

"Lovely to see you," Zane coos, the tone, the pitch of his voice, so condescending my churning stomach settles. There is no way he's speaking to Rune in that manner. "I see you dressed your part."

My mind swims as I stand. Next to me, Breaker moves just as slowly, buttoning his suit jacket almost in sync with me. When our eyes meet again, I know he's just as confused as me.

"And I see you have as well." Her sweet, honey voice melts over me, a soothing balm.

Relief floods me the second I realize we're not suddenly facing Rune unprepared, but a different issue makes my pulse skyrocket.

Cora is here.

In this room.

When I turn, I see silky black material wrapping the perfect little body that I swear was made just for us to cherish. Then, breasts that nearly burst from the low-cut neckline. I look up at her face, taking in her cute cheeks sprinkled with freckles, surrounded by vibrant red waves and small ringlets that always escape any attempt to tame them.

My entire body sings as I take her in. Her stern expression. Cora's delicious curves and the black stilettos that look impossible to walk in. The way she cocks her head to the side, as if she's inspecting Zane.

She flicks his tie and grins. "That suit looks good on you, Zane. No one would ever know you're hiding a pencil dick under those slacks."

Beside me, Breaker makes a sound. My head ticks, her words settling uncomfortably in my head.

Everything Breaker told me about all she has endured, the vision of those bruises left on her skin, the incision to remove the birth control, makes my hands fist. I shove them into my slacks to keep from snatching up a knife and aiming for Zane's eyes.

Biting her lip, Cora turns her attention to us, and I swear to god, I think my heart may actually give out as her emerald eyes meet mine. Her lips form a tight little line as she looks between us. Her gaze moves over Breaker, almost assessing, then to me.

Fuck, she's a good little actress, and she's so sexy, so perfect in her tight black dress, that my heart races.

Everything we're doing, all the things we've done—the lies, the secrets we're keeping, the complicated plan to end Rune—will keep her safe.

I'll fucking make sure of it.

"Gentlemen," Zane says, that spiteful grin turning uglier. Meaner. "Rune sent a gift for your efforts. A little someone to sweeten the deal."

The second the words leave Zane's mouth, the idea of murdering him intensifies. I can practically feel Breaker's anger as intensely as my own. I school my features as he looks our way, knowing that any reaction will blow our cover.

Rune's whoring her out.

He's fucking using her as a bargaining chip to get closer to us.

Fucking Reaper.

He knew.

I'm going to throttle him when I see him again.

That buzzing feeling intensifies, my skin itching as rage winds itself around my bones. Rune Gavin is a sick fuck. His greed had him handing her over to Zane to gain more wealth and secure his position with the families, but he's never resorted to using his daughters as payment.

Then again, she's not his daughter, and that's the problem.

My jaw clenches so hard my head aches. When I feel Breaker shift, feel his arm move and from the corner of my eye see his hand tap at his tie, I take a deep breath to calm myself. At least one of us needs to maintain control, and Breaker showing signs he's about to snap means I have to

focus. He’s already proven that when it comes to our girls, his control is razor-thin.

Zane’s cruel smile grows as he gestures toward Cora. “Meet Cora Julian, Rune’s daughter—”

“Adopted,” she adds, cutting him off.

“Yes, adopted,” Zane says. He looks me in the eye and says, “Rune hopes you’ll accept his offer.”

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Chapter 31

Cora

I THOUGHT VIPER IN HIS tight jeans and T-shirt and Breaker in his sleek, black-on-black tux was dangerously sexy. But nothing could prepare me for the level of pure male these two emanate, wearing tailored suits, crisp ties, and arrogant expressions.

Viper stands a good two inches shorter than Breaker, yet he doesn't lose an ounce of his commanding presence. He sucks the air from the room, my lungs. Piercing ocean-blue eyes glint with an intensity I've never seen in him before, sending an electric jolt through my core.

During those weeks back at the mansion, I watched them long enough that I can tell they are both tense under those precisely cut suits.

I suck in a breath, forcing myself not to react. I just walked in on a deal between Zane and the men.

I am part of that deal.

You don't know them, Cora, I remind myself. *You don't know how they taste, or what they sound like when they come. Certainly, you've never known sweet words whispered in your ear or a hand between your thighs, nor promises.*

The silent reminder doesn't help my jittery nerves.

Viper remains motionless, eyes traveling from my shoes to the top of my head, lingering on my legs. Breaker stands equally still beside him, his gorgeous face stern, jawline hard enough to cut teeth. I note how he taps his

thigh a few times, then drops his hand, like he realized what he was doing and forced himself to stop.

If I weren't so terrified of slipping up, I'd be enjoying this. Fooling Zane. But right now, terror snakes a path through my stomach, and I'm worried Zane will suddenly figure out their ruse.

"Ah, Zane's ex-fiancée," Breaker says. His cool tone and the slight tilt of his head as he stares at me have me blinking in shock. He doesn't even sound like himself, and I swear there's a hint of something dark in his expression.

Something cruel that doesn't fit with the man I've come to know.

I don't like it. His casual indifference.

"If only he were that lucky," I say, acid lining each word as I fall into my role.

Before I can take a step toward the men, Zane grabs my arm with his good hand and drags me toward the bar. I catch the furious, deadly expression on Viper's face as his eyes flicker toward Breaker. I swear we have the same thought.

If Zane doesn't get his hands off me, Breaker might explode at any moment.

"Listen, whore," Zane whispers, when we're out of earshot, "you're going to be a good little bitch and sit down and be quiet."

I plaster a smile on my face. "Might want to be a good boy, and remember"—I lean in, letting my smile fade—"to shut the fuck up when I tell you before you end up on Papa's bad side."

His jaw flexes, teeth grinding with an audible click as he stands to his full height, staring down at me with such hatred my skin pricks. Maybe threatening him again, reminding him what I know, isn't a good idea, but it's all I have in my arsenal.

"I'm not scared of you," he sneers.

My lip curls into a smirk at how easily I rattle him. "Really? You ran to Rune with rattling knees and did exactly as I demanded." I smooth a hand over my thigh, wiping away nervous sweat on my sleek black dress. "So unless you want all your secrets to spill from my lips, back the fuck off."

"The only thing spilling from your lips will be their cum." A grotesque smile cuts across his face. Sharp and cruel. "Is he whoring you out to all three of them? Rune must be sick of your sloppy cunt."

Anger shoots up my spine, straightening it. I try to jerk out of his grasp, but his hand tightens. The night of the fundraiser flashes through my mind. Rune forcing me to my knees, Zane's dick slipping over my mouth.

Of course, he knows what Rune does.

Zane knows everything. Why should this surprise me?

"Fuck you, Zane," I say, his words creating a hollowed-out cavern in my chest.

"Where is your nasty lapdog?" Zane hisses, "Is he too busy to save you again?"

The door behind us opens, and Clyde enters the room, adjusting his cuffs. He shoots Zane a murderous look when he sees his fingers wrapped around my bicep. "If you want to keep the use of your right hand, keep your filthy fingers to yourself."

"Right," Zane says, dropping his hand. "Don't want to taint the merchandise."

I grind my jaw, keeping every foul thing I want to scream locked behind my teeth. I know if I lose control, it will jeopardize this meeting the men have worked so hard to set up.

Part of me wonders if Reaper had a feeling that Rune would use me this way. If this was his plan when he sent me back. He had to know Rune would do anything, use any means, to get close to them.

It makes me wonder how much of this plan he's manipulated. Fucking us that night in Rune's club. Taking me along with Delilah.

Sending me back.

Me in this room, right now.

I take a deep breath and smile at Zane. If it means I have to shove any last bits of pride down to the depths of hell to stay in Rune's good graces, then I will. Reaper wants information.

"Shall we get to it?" I ask, turning toward Viper and Breaker, and stalking toward the table where they stand.

That's when I notice the weapons.

I pause mid-stride, reminding myself not to react, not to look at the men, but I fail on one count—reacting—but succeed by looking at Zane.

"Are we training to be Samurai now?" I ask, doing my best to cover my misstep as I approach.

When I reach a chair, intending to sit, Zane grips my arm. "Whores don't sit at the table," he says, pointing to the bar where Clyde's slowly

lowering himself onto a stool, his body rigid with rage. “Go sit like a good little bitch until they’re ready to test the goods.”

My shoulders stiffen. I let out a slow, steady breath, my cheeks heating.

“Then I guess you’ll be taking the seat next to me.” I point to the bar. “You know, where the whores sit.”

“Cora,” Clyde warns.

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” Zane says. He snaps, and the dark-haired guard standing behind Breaker stalks toward me and grips my arm. He drags me back toward Clyde, who looks like he’s about to burst out of his skin. I jerk my arm from his grasp, smoothing down my dress, trying to calm the boiling in my blood.

The guard pulls out a stool, taps my ass and gives it a pinch. “Sit down, pretty girl.” He winks. “Be a good girl.”

My hands fist, nails digging into my palms. Shame makes my heart race. Seems the fall from ruin lands me in the gutter. The humiliation of all the years I let Rune touch me to keep myself in his good graces has led me here. The fact that the men around me know it makes it so much worse. I’m forced to be grateful for this fucked-up situation because he’s literally handing me over to them instead of Zane. Or someone else. I’m not even allowed the dignity of fighting it.

Because I would. I would fight this tooth and nail if I didn’t know the men.

I glance at Clyde. He’s watching me, like he’s waiting. He knows me well enough that I, Cora Julian, daughter of the disgraced Caroline Julian, the most ruthless businesswoman to ever grace the underworld of Miami, would never tolerate being called a whore or being shoved around by Zane.

Steeling my spine, I face the guard. “What is your name?”

A slick smile forms. “Damon.”

“Well, Damon, how about this?” I lean in, smiling sweetly. “Touch me again and I’ll use your pistol to shoot off every finger you used to grope me.”

Flicking my hair over my shoulder, I turn and stalk across the room, my heels clicking on the glossy floor, each step precise and defiant. I stop before the table laid out with various swords and knives, and plant my palms on the cool surface, leaning forward until I can see the flecks of gold in Viper’s irises, then shift to meet Breaker’s unflinching gaze. The corner

of his mouth twitches. A faint smile, barely there, then gone, but my pulse jumps anyway.

"It appears my associate forgets his manners," I say. "I'm Rune Gavin's adopted daughter and accountant. The same person who drafted the papers for the hotel acquisitions."

"Oh, I remember you." Viper's voice drops an octave, a hint of an accent curling around the words like smoke. "You're a hard one to forget."

"Just sit down, Cora," Zane says, tone bored as he gestures to the empty chair. "I want to get this over with."

Viper stands, pulling out the seat next to him, and I lower myself, glaring at Zane. "Need a coke break already?" I ask him, settling into the seat.

"Feisty," Viper says, looming over me. He snags a loose curl, wrapping it around his finger. "I like a little fight."

My cheeks heat at the suggestive tone.

Jesus. Okay. So Viper, or rather, Vince, is flirty.

My eyes drift to his thick thighs stretching the black fabric of his slacks. When I realize I'm staring, I slap his hand away the way I would, had I not desperately wanted to be in his lap, nibbling at his powerful jaw, and return my attention to Zane. I never thought looking at Zane would be preferable, but a seductive Viper is messing with my equilibrium.

Clearing my throat, I keep my focus on Zane. "What are we buying? Rune isn't one for collecting swords and"—I gesture to the long knives lining the table—"whatever this is."

Viper leans over me and picks up a large curved sword, holding in both hands to show me. "A genuine Japanese Katana. Tamahagane steel." The slick sound as he unsheathes it sends a strange heat sparking low in my belly. His thumb runs along the carvings in the handle, and he tilts the sword slightly, displaying the etches along the blade, then slides it back in its sheath and picks up another smaller knife. "A drop-point hunter crafted by Warenski."

Zane points to a simple knife resting closer to him. "How sharp is that one?"

Viper's thigh hits my shoulder as he leans over and picks up the knife, and another electric jolt travels through me. He keeps the knife in its case, pointing out the intricate oriental patterns that wrap along the simple

wooden sheath. Out of everything on the table, it's the least assuming, least decorated knife.

"Made from Yasugi steel," Viper says. "The highest-quality traditional-style Japanese knives."

"It looks like a kitchen knife," I say as he slides it from the sheath and shows me the blade.

"It is." He sets it down. "Some of the finest Japanese cutlery. It's used for slicing meat."

I frown, remembering they are selling weapons for Rune's game hunts.

"Shall we discuss terms?" Zane asks. The way he eyes the kitchen knife makes my stomach twist grossly.

"I have the terms here." Clyde says, crossing the room. He hands Viper a small gold envelope with a red wax seal. The one I know that holds my fate. Funny how one piece of paper can alter an entire life. If handed to the wrong person, that single note could ruin me. It almost did when Rune tried to marry me off to Zane.

Now that Zane's called things off, I'm being offered to Viper in good faith. Rune handing me over to them shows a level of trust, not just in business, but with my life. I'm his adopted daughter, and on the outside, I'm a valuable asset.

Like Zane said, I'm here to sweeten the deal.

Sitting in the chair beside me, Viper pops the seal, removes the letter from the envelope, and slowly unfolds it, an uncaring, callous look on his stunning face. A flicker of something passes behind his eyes as he skims the letter. He rubs the thick paper between his fingers like he's debating the words on the page, then hands it to Breaker.

When Breaker reads what Rune wrote, he tilts his head to the side, gaze dragging over me, then hands the paper back to Viper. Like they do this every day. Bargain in women and sex and weapons.

Hell, for all I know, they do.

The thought sticks uncomfortably in the back of my mind.

Viper sets the letter down on the table, then taps a finger to the center of the page as he eyes, first Clyde, then Zane. "Does Rune often use his daughter as a bargaining chip?"

Zane gives a nonchalant shrug that makes my fingers itch to slap him. "What Rune does with his property is of no concern to me."

Property. God, I hate this man.

"Why would he want to take the offer?" Breaker asks. "Isn't she the one with a loose cunt?"

Red heat travels from my neck to my cheeks. "Excuse me?" I say, glaring at Zane. "You said *what* about me?"

"Cora," Clyde warns, placing a hand on my shoulder. To Viper he says, "Either you accept or you don't."

Viper drags his eyes over me in a way that makes my cheeks burn hotter than they already were. "I accept."

"Good," Zane says. "When can we finalize the deal?"

"After full payment is received," Viper says.

"She's payment enough for now," Zane says. "Rush it. Rune wants all the weapons in place before the members arrive. He has a special event planned."

Viper leans back in his seat, propping an elbow on the back of the chair, leveling him with a cool gaze. "You will receive the rest of the weapons once I confirm the wire transfer."

"The funds will be transferred after we receive all the weapons." Zane motions to me. "Rune knows you will take care of Cora until then. Just as we are sure that the cutlery will be sent out tomorrow as agreed." He points to a large hunting knife. "Include several of these."

He leans forward, reaching for the hunting knife with jewels encrusted in the handle, but Viper moves faster, snatching it up, and grips Zane's wrist. The knife slams down into the wooden table, digging in deep right next to Zane's hand. A smirk plays across his face as he watches Zane's expression fall.

A ruthless chuckle escapes Breaker. He leans toward Zane, eyes glimmering with something I've never seen before. Some dark, sinister thing that sends a strange tingle up my spine.

Seems I keep forgetting who and what they are.

"No touching the merchandise until the sale is final," Breaker says. "Vince doesn't like dirty hands defiling his possessions."

Zane clears his throat, recovering, but Viper doesn't release his wrist, that dangerous thing under his skin turning his expression sharp.

I think this is the first time I've ever pitied Zane.

Viper's blue-green eyes stay locked on Zane's face as he says to me, "Your father's partner is disrespectful." He cocks his head to the side, his

grip tightening on the knife handle. “Since he’s so curious, should I demonstrate how sharp it is for him?”

Breaker lets out a ruthless chuckle.

I smile smugly, my belly fluttering at the level of rage pouring from Viper. “I’m not sure, Zane. Should we?”

Zane leans back in his seat, attempting to lift his injured hand. “Apologies.”

Seeing Zane apologize sends sparks of cruel joy through me.

Viper releases Zane and stands upright. He grabs the letter from the table, and slips it back in the envelope, then tucks it in the pocket of his suit jacket. “I accept her. If anyone disrespects what’s mine again, the deal is off.” He rolls the weapons up but leaves the hunting knife embedded in the table. He gestures to it. “In good faith.” He backs away, adjusting his cuffs and buttoning his suit jacket, calm and collected. Viper flings a hand in my direction. “I’ll take her now.”

My heart does a flip.

Clyde steps between me and Viper. “Where she goes, I go.”

“That’s going to make for an interesting night, old man.” Viper glances at Breaker. “Good thing I have an enormous bed. Seems it’s going to be crowded.”

Breaker stands and buttons his suit jacket, barely looking my way as he offers his hand. “Let’s go.”

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Chapter 32

Cora

EACH BUMP IN THE road jars my shoulders against theirs. I count my breaths, trying to slow the hammering of my heart, but every inhale fills my lungs with Breaker's woodsy scent. Viper's clean, citrusy smell. Memories of them assault every sense as we drive further and further away from Rune's club. Their hands, their hot breath, and kisses between my thighs.

The leather seat creaks in the silent car as I shift, searching for an inch of space, my body too aware of them both as their driver speeds down the interstate. It's not just Viper and Breaker's large bodies that take up so much space, it's the oppressive air in the car, every single secret we're keeping making the air thick with tension.

I'm beginning to understand why Rune is so paranoid all the time. All the lies and secrets eat at your brain after a while. Doubt stabs at your facade like sharp talons, and you worry you're not fooling a single soul.

Like right now. I swear the driver knows everything. The way his eyes flicker to me every few seconds has me winding my fingers in my lap. So I keep my back ramrod straight, an angry mask covering up my fear. Anyone who looks at me would think I'm enraged at the fact I was just essentially whored out by my adopted father to a weapons dealer and his partners.

Liar that I am.

I couldn't be happier.

We just need to get away with it.

The driver slows down after we leave the interstate, heading east, until we finally enter an older neighborhood. He stops in front of massive iron gates set in a tall stucco wall. I lean forward in my seat, taking in the scene as the car weaves along the driveway up to the Spanish-style mansion set back from the waterway. Little lights glow along the path, lighting up the lush greenery leading to the main door, giving the landscape an ethereal glow.

The second the car stops at the front of the estate, Breaker shoves the car door open and stalks up the walkway, up the steps, then vanishes through the massive wrought iron front doors, leaving them open.

Before the driver can get out, Viper swings the car door open, and steps out, offering me his hand.

I bat his hand away and place one heel on the pavement.

“Mind yourself,” Viper says coolly, but I’m not sure if it’s a warning to watch my attitude or a reminder to keep my composure and their cover.

“Mind yourself, Mr. Campbell,” I snap, straightening my dress.

Behind us, Clyde’s car slows to a stop. He gets out and stalks toward us, eyeing Viper, and stops inches away but remains silent.

I smooth my dress down, my hand stopping at my belly.

Some silent exchange happens between them, both men glancing my way briefly before Viper turns toward the driver. “I won’t need you anymore tonight.”

The man nods and gets back in the car and drives away, leaving the three of us alone.

Viper offers his hand again. I look down at his open palm, and, for a heartbeat, I can barely breathe. Viper has been so many things in the past month. He was my captor. My company when I was too scared to be left alone in that room. A confusing mix of lust and longing. I’ve seen so many sides of him I shouldn’t be surprised at the version of him right now.

Yet I am.

I have no idea who this man is. He’s Viper, yes, the man who stole me, fucked me, claimed Delly and me, but at the same time, he’s not him. He’s colder. Harder. So not like the man who held me in the bathroom of that worn-down factory and promised to kiss every inch of my skin to remind me I was his.

And now I am his.

Handed over by Rune.

My belly flutters at the thought as I place my hand in his warm palm. I cast a glance at Clyde. His slight nod reminds me that this is okay. We are okay.

I'm okay.

With Clyde at my back, Viper pulls me up the stairs and through the doors. When we enter the house, we're greeted not just by an immense open room and ornate decorations, but by an older woman wearing an all-black uniform. Viper says something to her in Spanish, but my knowledge of the language isn't nearly at the level of his. He thanks her, then guides me to a set of stairs.

"You'll stay in the guest house," he says to Clyde over his shoulder, not bothering to look at him. Then he trains his eyes on a large doorway toward the left and shouts, "Constance."

A small, middle-aged woman appears. "Yes, sir."

"Ms. Julian will be our guest. Please have a few items for her delivered. Clothes and such." He gestures to Clyde. "Her bodyguard will provide details. And please make him comfortable in the guesthouse. Anything he needs."

She gives him a quick nod, then rushes toward Clyde. I cast a glance back at him as Viper drags me toward a massive stairway framed in thick pillars.

Money is a fickle thing. It's earned, stolen, easily lost and just as easily gained with some good luck and connections, or you take it by force and fuck people over.

But power, just like Viper said, is created.

Rune is wealthy. I grew up in luxury, but this is a level that goes beyond our reach. Now I know why Rune is so desperate to get the Snyder Group on his side. It isn't just money the men possess. This is true power, and it radiates from the man before me.

I look around, taking in the open courtyard in the center of the home, the palms that reach up toward the metal and glass ceiling, and the lavish furniture, wondering where Breaker went, and remind myself I don't know them.

You're the payment, Cora. I take a slow breath as Viper leads me upstairs to the second floor.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

“No talking,” Viper says, his voice low. When we pass a small woman carrying a bundle of towels down the hall, he stops and thanks her for her hard work, then tells her she’s dismissed for the evening.

As she nods and scurries away, it hits me. They can’t slip for a minute. *We* can’t slip. Not in front of the staff or anywhere there may be eyes because they have no idea who is watching.

With the realization, I jerk my hand away from Viper. “If you think I’m fucking you, Mr. Campbell, you’re sadly mistaken.”

Slowly, he turns on his heel, and when his fiery gaze lands on me, heat blooms in my core. Viper takes one, two, steps toward me, stopping inches away, his eyes ignited with a menacing fire. He’s so much bigger than me, not just in height but in sheer bulk, that I suck in a breath.

Viper is scary, but Vincent Campbell is terrifying.

He grips my neck. My clit pulses. He moves forward, and his chest hits mine. I stumble backward until I hit the wall. A large picture frame digs into my spine as he presses his body to me, shoving his thigh between my legs. My dress rides up, and my pulse hammers.

“You’re going to do exactly as I say, when I say it, pretty Vixen.” Somehow he moves even closer, so that every part of us touches, the heat of him seeping through our clothes, sinking under my skin, the slight citrusy scent of him invading all my senses.

“Do you understand?” He licks his lips, and I track the movement, my breath growing heavier. His eyes search mine, and I catch everything he’s not saying.

I’m right.

Viper is Vince from here on out. Breaker is Ben, and I’m the woman he just accepted as payment in some twisted business deal.

I clear my throat, then nod.

“Good,” he whispers, the word washing over me. “Because the second I get you to my room, you’re going to spread those gorgeous thighs and let me eat that little pussy until you forget your name.”

I shutter out a breath but keep my mouth closed, my veins glowing red hot from the heat lining each word. He drops his hand and backs away, then gestures for me to follow him, so I do, watching staff scurry past as he leads me toward the large double doors at the end of the hall. With a hard shove, they swing open and a massive room with an enormous bed in the center comes into view.

Everything is ornate and heavy dark wood. The glossy wood floors, the four-poster bed draped with white, gauzy material. Large palms sit in bright blue pots in the corners, framing massive windows overlooking the ocean.

“I like the whole Columbian drug lord vibe, Mr. Campbell,” I say. “It’s fitting.”

“Your sassy mouth might earn you a spanking,” Viper says, shooting me another warning look. He snaps his fingers, and a girl wearing the same black uniform as everyone else rushes into the room.

“Thank you,” he says to her. “I want privacy tonight.”

“*Si*,” she says, practically giving him a curtsy as she scurries away and closes the doors behind her.

“Do you beat the staff?” I ask because I can’t seem to help myself. “Everyone here is terrified of you.”

“It’s not fear, Vixen. It’s respect. And it’s earned by treating others with the same level I demand.” Viper points to a silky-covered chaise lounge by the massive windows overlooking the ocean. “Sit. Do not move until I give you permission.”

There is no room for argument in his tone, his eyes telling me to shut my mouth and do as he says. So I do. I lower myself onto the seat and cross my ankles, tracking Viper’s every move as he crosses the room and digs a small device from the bottom drawer of a long wooden dresser. When he swipes the surface, then moves along the wall, the floorboards, and picture frames, the gravity of the situation hits home. He’s checking for bugs.

Rune always had our offices, our homes, and cars swept every week out of fear of who was listening in. He was always so paranoid, and now I know why. He deals in weapons, and for all I know, drugs too.

When Viper’s done in the room, he moves to the bathroom, and comes out a minute later, then sweeps the large walk-in closet.

“It’s clear,” he says, visibly relaxing but tensing again when the bedroom doors explode open.

Breaker stalks through, his pale eyes locked on Viper as he shuts first one door, then the other, and stands before them, his back pressed to the ornate wood.

“Most of the staff has left, but a few are still cleaning. The surrounding rooms and hallway are clear, but I haven’t swept downstairs.” Breaker glances my way, then turns back to Viper. “But I would like to

know why you don't look surprised that Rune essentially sold our girl to Vincent Campbell?"

"Reaper knew Rune would hand her over," Viper says. "Fucking asshole could have told us."

"He couldn't," I snap, hackles rising as I bolt up from the chaise. "This had to be Rune's idea. If you had hinted at wanting me in any capacity, Rune would have been suspicious. He's paranoid enough as it is. He had to see the benefit of using me to get close to you on his own."

"Why do I have a feeling you two know something I don't?" Breaker says, eyes moving between Viper and me.

"Because we do," Viper says, confirming my suspicions that Reaper manipulated this entire situation. He points to me. "But this? This is a fucking problem."

I scoff, placing my hands on my hips.

"Why?" Breaker asks. "She's safe with us. Away from Rune. He can't touch her. We can keep her in the house, and—"

"Do not talk about me as if I'm not here!" My scream crashes through the room. Both men freeze and stop arguing. I point at each of them. "How dare you treat me as if I'm a problem when you placed me right in the devil's path for him to use!"

"That's not what I mean," Viper starts, but I cut him off.

"You kidnapped me, held me captive, and fucked with my head for weeks." I let out a strangled sound that sounds a little too close to anguish. "You claimed me as yours. And now you're telling me I'm a hindrance to your plans?"

"Little Red," Breaker says, moving my way, but I hold up a hand to keep him at bay. It's too easy to be distracted by him. He's warm and safe, and god I want nothing more than to sink into him. Let him hold me, hide me, keep me.

"I am a part of this," I say. "You made me a part of this the second you stepped foot in that club."

The two men exchange another look I can't read.

"You will not lock me out of conversations, keep things from me, or hide the truth any longer," I say. "This is my life, and I have a say in how we move forward."

I've had zero control of anything in my life, and I'll be damned if I let them take this one thing from me. I finally have something to fight for.

For the first time in my life, there is something worth protecting.

Delly. Them.

Me. *I'm* worth fighting for.

Reaper knew I was strong enough for this.

"If your plan is to kill Rune, then goddammit, I'm going to make sure you succeed," I say, standing straighter. Taller. "I'm still Rune's accountant. He still needs me. I'm not stuck here."

Breaker makes a strange sound in his throat, rubbing his hand along his jaw. He opens his mouth as if to say something, but Viper cuts him off.

"We can figure out the details later," he says, quirking a brow at Breaker, then to me he says, "If you're going to be a part of this, then you have to do as we say."

"Fine," I say, rolling my shoulders, relaxing. "This deal is my punishment for Zane's refusal. I service you, then I return to Rune with my tail between my legs and report back. What I tell him depends on what he wants to do next."

A slow, devious smirk lights up Viper's face. He loosens his black tie, eyes eating me up as they move over my body. "You're going to service us?"

"No," I snap, crossing my arms as I glance between the two men. "If anything, you're going to service me."

A smile curls Breaker's lip. He pushes off the door and takes a step toward me. "That can be arranged, Little Red."

The heated look and husky way the words spill from him have me dropping my arms, taking a small step back. Nerves rattle my bones as the reality settles in.

I'm alone with them.

I'm standing in a room with two of the men who claimed me as theirs.

Whatever Breaker sees in my expression has him stalking my way and cupping my cheeks, those winter eyes searching my face. He must see the realization as it washes over me. How it nearly makes my knees buckle with the way my chest opens, breaths becoming easier with each inhale. The first full breaths I've been able to take in years.

Breaker swipes his thumb over my cheek, collecting a tear, then brings it to his lips, tasting my relief.

I'm safe.

They have me now. Everything, every moment of horror, every terrible second of fear, has led us to this moment where Rune unknowingly handed me over to his enemies.

Reaper had to know.

Trust me, he asked. So, I did.

And now I'm here. Safe and with the men who promised me they'd come for me. Who promised they'd never let me go.

My chest squeezes almost painfully at the realization. Breaker kisses each cheek, then lets me go. I clear my throat, sliding my hands down my dress, trying to regain my composure before I collapse into a heap on the floor.

He sweeps my hair over my shoulder, making a shiver run down my spine. "What do you want, Little Red?"

I clear my throat, backing away from his heat and want so I can think. "What do you propose?"

A dangerously seductive smile lifts the corner of Breaker's mouth. "Anything. Everything."

"Whatever you desire, my sweet little Vixen," Viper says, and I shift my focus to him. He removes his tie. It falls to the floor with a whisper. Those powerful hands that have held me captive, brought me to pleasure, slowly unbutton his shirt, popping them open one by one. Deliberate. Seductive.

"How would you like us?" Breaker asks.

I bite my lip, so focused on Viper's hands, that all those lighter, fuller breaths get trapped in my lungs, and it's suddenly hard to breathe again.

Have I seen Viper's bare chest?

No, I've only seen Breaker's entire nude body not that long ago, and I barely made it out alive. Viper? The two of them?

Together?

I lick my lips, forcing out a breath. It catches in my throat as he untucks his shirt and lets it fall open. Only a slip of skin peeks out from the black button-down, but it's enough to create a slick warmth between my thighs. The same five skulls inked onto Breaker and Striker's skin, the last one with a line through it, spans Viper's chest. I drink in the light dusting of hair over his pecs, the cut lines of his abdomen, every plane of muscle so sharp, so perfect, he's a work of art framed in a black suit.

“Worshiping your pretty little cunt with our tongues?” Breaker asks, moving toward me.

My gaze snaps to him. His tie slips from around his neck, and he pops the button of his collar. Goosebumps spread along my arms as I take a step back. The backs of my knees hit the side of the bed. The smooth, cool feel of the fabric centers my whirling thoughts.

“Then our cocks, one after another?” Viper asks. “Or would you prefer us filling both of your tight holes?”

My eyes drag over him, snagging on the bulge in his pants. My nipples tighten. *All* of me tightens, growing hot, like my skin is on fire, burning away every ounce of uncertainty.

A primal need surges through my core. To belong to them. Be owned by them.

To be theirs and for them to be mine.

“Getting ahead of yourselves, boys,” I say, straightening. “I say we start with you on your knees.”

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Chapter 33

Viper

THERE IS NOTHING MORE delicious than Cora right now, cheeks flushed, breath ragged as she stands beside the bed, commanding me to my knees. She's an absolute vision.

A gift.

One I'll never let go.

This courageous, strong woman before me is carved into my bones, and I'll kill anyone who tries to take her from us.

My fingers slip into my suit jacket, feeling the envelope. The fucking offer should infuriate me, but I can't help the twisted satisfaction that spreads through my chest.

She's mine.

Ours, and he can't take it back.

And now she's ordering me to my knees, and my cock is so hard that I can barely think beyond the words written in black ink on that paper.

"Anything for you, Vixen," I say, taking a step closer so I can brush my fingers along her delicate jawline. "Is that what you want? Me to kneel before you?"

Cora glances between Breaker and me, her eyes igniting. Her back straightens, and a smirk quirks her lips when she realizes the power she has in this moment. Her tongue runs over her lip and she smoothes a hand over her belly as if gathering her thoughts. Or her courage.

Has she ever had a moment where she was in full control of her body? Of her life?

Does she now finally realize, after being told for weeks, that she's ours?

She's been ours since the moment we saw her. Even if we didn't know it yet.

And right now I'll do, be anything, she needs to prove it.

"I made you a promise," I tell her, watching her features shift. They turn hard as shame makes her eyes flicker away, but when she looks back at me, then to Breaker, I see nothing but determination.

To own her body, her mind, and I think us too.

If only she knew she already owns every ounce of me.

They both do. And the second I get my hands on Delilah, I'm going to make sure she knows that every promise I made, every breath I breathe, is for them.

"You threatened to kiss every single inch of me," she says, her voice laced with lust. She looks at Breaker, who stands so close I can feel his heat and his want as if it were my own.

"Threats are a promise, are they not?" I ask. "I'd love to lick and kiss every inch of you, and obey every wicked command that slips past your lips."

She bites her lip, breathing turning ragged. Then it's like something in her lights up and she points to the floor again.

"Kneel," she says, her perfect heart mouth curling up at the corner. "Both of you."

"My beautifully dangerous Vixen, I'll gladly kneel before you and drink from all you offer." The second my knees hit the floor, Breaker is beside me, kneeling.

Fuck. The sight of him on his knees does something to me I didn't know existed. Breaker doesn't have a submissive bone in his body. He may be sweet, even gentle at times, but he's unforgiving in his dominance. The only commands he takes are Reaper's. Sometimes Striker's but that's rare because they are both too domineering to take orders from each other. Breaker will give me room to breathe, but he's never let me control any aspect of what we do together.

Cora sees it too, and her eyes flash with newfound power. "Remove your shirts."

Fabric rustles as we both comply, our shirts landing in heaps behind us. My cock pulses against my zipper with each beat of my heart.

She holds my gaze while her fingers hook under the thin straps of her dress, sliding them down her shoulders inch by deliberate inch. The silky material glides over her flesh, making me wish it was my tongue, before revealing the pale expanse of her skin, dotted with little freckles.

Beside me, Breaker's breath hitches. His weight shifts forward.

She holds up a finger, *tsking*. "Not yet, naughty boy," she teases. "I didn't say you could get up."

"He doesn't listen well," I remind her. "Hence his name."

She grins. "If he wants to stretch my pussy, he will."

"Jesus," he growls, looking at me. "How do you stand this?"

"Impatiently," I tell him, but my voice trails off as my gaze catches on the defined ridges of his chest, the many tattoos on his dark skin, the unmistakable outline pressing against his fly.

Cora's dress whispers to the floor, snatching my attention. Black lace cradles her breasts, matching the thin strip of material between her thighs. I lean forward, and my knees scrape against the hardwood, making me still. Distant memories scream hollowly in the back of my head, but I ignore them, and remain frozen, watching as her thumbs hook into the delicate strings at her hips. The lace slides down, revealing pink flesh. The black material pools at her feet, and she kicks it aside. Reaching behind her, she unsnaps her bra and shimmies out of it, tossing the lace away.

Jesus, she's so beautiful it hurts. Wearing nothing but heels, and standing before us like some small yet ferocious warrior, I decide right now that I'm a saint for remaining on the floor and not moving. I have to hand it to Breaker. He's barely breathing, he's so still.

"You're keeping those heels on," I tell her. The black heels with the red soles and the thin straps around her tiny ankles do something weird to me, verging on perverse.

"*Fuck*, Little Red," Breaker groans. "Bring that pussy over here and let me sink my tongue into you."

A wicked smile quirks the corner of her mouth, and she slides a finger over her pussy, gathering wetness. "Open," she tells him. He obeys, and she slips her finger into his mouth, pressing it down on his tongue.

My hands tingle with the need to grab her. Bury my face in her glistening cunt. Drive my tongue into her and taste what he's tasting now.

When he sucks her finger clean and releases it with a *pop*, I grow painfully hard imagining him taking my cock into his mouth, sucking hard and releasing me with that slick obscene sound.

"You'd look good with my cock in your mouth," I tell him. His gaze darts to me then drops to my pants. That flicker of jealousy I saw last night flares, and I smirk in satisfaction, but when Cora sits at the edge of the bed, both our attention snaps back to her.

She leans back on the bed, propping herself on her elbows. Her gaze burns molten as she props first one foot on the edge of the bed, blocking her pussy from my view, then the other.

"This may be how I die," Breaker says.

I have to agree. This devious teasing from our girl has my heart racing and my cock so hard, the front of my pants is damp with pre-cum.

Slowly, she parts her legs, and we're graced with her pink clit and glistening delicate flesh. One leg lifts, and the heel of her black stiletto hits the center of my chest, digging into the black lines of the tattoo. My cock pulses at the flicker of pain. I grip her foot with one hand and press my lips to her ankle, dragging my gaze up from between her thighs to her eyes. My chest bursts with something brilliant and light. I would spend an eternity before her, doing anything and everything she asked of me.

Our naughty little Vixen stretches out her other leg, and the emerald green of her eyes shimmers as she rests her heel on Breaker's chest.

His groan is purely animalistic.

"Stroke yourselves," she says, slipping a finger over her wet clit.

"Finally," I growl, unbuckling my belt and freeing myself.

Next to me, Breaker's belt *clinks*, and the sound of his zipper grates in the room. He groans, bucking into his fist.

"Little Red, please let me eat that pussy," he rasps.

I don't think I've ever heard the man beg for anything, so when I look over and find him watching her with the same devotion I feel surging through my chest, I know this is it.

This is the end all.

But we're missing pieces, and I feel their absence like a hole in the center of my being.

Breaker must feel it too because he strokes his cock and says, "I can't wait to get Delilah back and feast on you both."

Cora stops circling her clit and spreads her legs wider, the heel scraping over my chest. “Come feast,” she says, her voice a husky whisper. “Both of you.”

Slowly, I lower my mouth and press a delicate kiss to her calf. I trail more up her thigh, pushing her leg back as I move toward her. She exhales when I place a kiss on the small freckle on her inner thigh. I take my time, my mouth skimming along her flesh before I grip her thigh tightly and shove it up, pressing it to her chest so her pussy and ass are exposed. Breaker moves in beside me, our shoulders touching. We adjust our bodies, trying to fit together in the limited space. I lean down at the same moment he does, and our eyes collide.

Slowly, Breaker flicks his tongue out, taking a long, slow lick from her tight hole to her clit, almost daring me.

“Fuck yes,” she groans.

We had Delilah like this, spread open on the table, our fingers moving into her, our mouths on her one after another while Striker held her open, but this feels different. This feels like everything is about to change.

I dip my head, feeling his heat, his breaths, and do the same, savoring her. Sweet, and tart and so perfectly her, I do it again, gripping my shaft hard. Breaker’s cheek presses to mine, and the tip of his tongue swirls around her clit as I lap at her entrance, barely brushing against his.

“Oh, my fuck,” she groans, her fingers diving between her legs and spreading herself open. “Again. Please don’t stop.”

He sucks her clit into his mouth, and I lean back, greedily watching. The second he lets go, I dive in, tasting his mouth on her and her heat. Breaker angles in closer, and his chest slicks over mine. His hand hits the head of my dick as he strokes himself, and he leans in, devouring her with as much hunger as I feel.

When I dip my head again, our tongues slip over one another, and his breathing changes. I stroke myself, heat ripping through my veins like lava, and use my free hand to grip the back of his neck before leaning in to devour her.

“Good boy, eat her pretty pussy,” Breaker groans, licking along with me. His breath fans my face, his tongue slicking against mine, each word grating over me as they tumble from him. “Let me see how good she tastes on your tongue.”

I lean back, locking eyes with him. Without giving him a moment to reconsider, I shift and press my lips against his. His eyes flare wildly. Using my grip on the back of his neck to keep him still, I lick deeply into his mouth. A guttural, almost primal sound escapes him as he exhales, and his tongue slips eagerly against mine.

My cock throbs, and I swear I'm about to come from just the taste of him. Earthy with a hint of spice, flavored with Cora's tangy wetness.

We both back away, and Breaker's hooded gaze drops to my mouth. We're so close that his icy-blue eyes, darkened with desire, seem to throb, the irises pulsating with want. His smooth, dark skin glistens with a fine sheen of sweat, beading on his upper lip.

I want to taste him. More than just his dick in my mouth. More than just his cum and quick desire.

I *crave* him. Yearn for every part of him. Every drop of blood. Every single atom that makes him him. Tightening my grip on the back of his neck, I dip my head and drive my tongue into Cora's center, swirling and thrusting deeper as she writhes under my touch, pushing against my mouth. Breaker leans down again, sucking on her clit, our tongues intertwining.

She cries out, curses and murmurs of praise, spilling from her lips in breathy moans. When she tries to draw her knees together, I know she's close. I plunge my tongue back into her, fucking her.

Breaker flattens his tongue against her clit, and she breaks with a scream. I keep moving into her, lapping up her release, pinning her thigh to her chest until she's trembling, gasping, begging me to stop.

When I release her leg, I lean in close to him, my lips brushing his ear. "Open your mouth."

He parts his lips and I spit her wetness into his mouth, then drive my tongue deep, locking my mouth to his. His moan vibrates through me. My fingers dig into the back of his neck, my grasp bruising with the desire to keep him close. Our teeth clash. His stubble burns against my chin. The taste of her mingles with something uniquely him. Salt and whiskey and want.

Years. I've denied us years of this all out of fear.

Fear I was too damaged to love him properly. Too sick from every evil touch that feels like it's stained me to the point of ruin. So broken and so scared, I was sick and ruined and needed saving because I wanted the

man who was supposed to be my brother. Who I looked after and protected and cherished.

My hand trembles against his skin. My chest tightens with each heartbeat. Every brush of his tongue against mine erases another memory that has kept me caged. Cold stone floors, whispered sins, locked doors and brutal demands, shame burning my ears red as I did everything I was told.

I break our kiss, and exhale shakily into his mouth. When I open my eyes, he's watching me.

"About fucking time," he says, then leans in and places a kiss on the corner of my mouth. "Now help me fuck our girl."

I look up to find Cora watching us through half-lidded eyes, her chest rising and falling with each ragged breath.

"You've never kissed before," she whispers, and I'm not sure if it's a statement or a revelation. "Do it again."

Breaker's chuckle as he grips my chin and places his mouth on mine sends warmth through me. When he backs away, Cora sits upright, reaching for us. Her fingers wrap around us both, the pad of her thumb circling the sensitive spot just beneath my crown. We're pressed so close that when she strokes upward, the ridge of my cock catches against Breaker's, sending a jolt up my spine.

"Fuck me," she breathes. "First you, Breaker."

He grips her hips and pulls her up, spinning her until he's sitting with her on his lap, facing me.

"Hold on, Little Red," Breaker murmurs against the pulse point at her neck.

She leans back, anchoring her feet on either side of his thighs as he grips her waist and lifts. From this angle, I can see everything. His perfect dick and heavy balls drawn up tight from the need to release. Her wet slit, and perfect tight hole. I take hold of his dick, and I guide him to her opening, slapping her clit with the head of his cock before slipping it into her. She groans, her head falling back, exposing the column of her throat, as he lowers her onto his shaft.

She stretches around him, taking him inch by inch, her lips parting in a silent gasp as he sinks deeper. I trace slow circles over her swollen flesh with my thumb, and she relaxes, taking more of him.

"Fuck, she's tight," he whispers, jaw clenched tight, a vein throbbing at his temple. "Like silk wrapped around my cock."

I brush tendrils of hair away from her face. “God, you're beautiful.” When I brush my lips to hers, she whimpers. “Do you like feeling him stretch you, Vixen?” I whisper against her mouth. She breathes out, nodding.

His hips rise from the bed, slipping his cock deeply into her, fucking her gently. The sight of him slipping in and out, his shaft glistening with her arousal, is so erotic, so inviting, that I trace my tongue along the seam where they’re joined. Salty sweetness, rich with Breaker’s taste, floods my senses, and I hungrily lap at them, gliding my tongue along his shaft. When I reach her clit, I suck. She arches sharply, a cry tearing from her throat.

“Again,” Breaker growls, fingers digging into her hips. “*Fuck*, do that again.”

I do and this time draw him out completely, taking him deep into my mouth before guiding him back to her pussy. She shudders, and I go back to her clit, sucking and nibbling. Licking and devouring as he pumps into her, each thrust harder and deeper.

Breaker’s throaty moan tells me he’s close.

“Fill her up,” I say, stroking my cock, my mouth on her clit. “Give it to her. Give her all that cum.”

He bucks brutally up into her, holding himself deep in her, and her release bursts out of her, her entire body trembling. His thick cock slides out, slick with his cum. I lean in, tasting his salty cleanness as he pulls out, wrapping my lips around his tip and sucking as he makes a hissing sound that edges on pain. He pops free, and she falls boneless backward, barely bracing herself up with her palms on the bed.

Breaker’s cum leaks from her, and I remember that her birth control implant was removed. Something feral, some primitive thing, rakes across my chest, and I thrust two fingers into her, driving his cum deeper and deeper into her pussy, wild with a need to claim her.

“Hold on, Vixen,” I grate, helping Breaker flip her limp body. “I’m not done with you yet.”

She smiles, a lopsided grin, and moves to her hands and knees over Breaker. He catches her mouth in a brutal kiss as I slip my dick over her cum-soaked pussy.

That feral need slams into me again, and I drive in hard, pressing a finger to her tight back hole. She makes another guttural sound.

“You’re ours,” I say, driving in harder. “No one can touch you. Never again.”

A strangled sob comes from her, and I kiss her spine, wrapping an arm around her waist as Breaker continues to take her mouth.

“Oh, *madadh ruadh,*” I breathe, placing kisses along her spine. “Tell me you feel this.”

“Yes,” she breathes, burying her face in Breaker’s neck. “Tell me you want me.”

My chest squeezes, and I press my forehead between her shoulder blades, breathing her in, trying to pour every ounce of my heart into my words. “With every fiber of my being.”

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Chapter 34

Viper

15 Years Ago, December, Age 18

WINTERS HERE EAT AWAY at your soul. The barren landscape and bitter cold whittle you down day by day until you're just as empty and hopeless. During the day the sun barely helps combat the chill and on the really cold days, there's frost on the walls of our rooms. At night, the boiler groans and creaks, making the metal radiators lining the walls rattle. It's so cold, even the little rats creeping around the kitchen at night disappear, no doubt huddled together behind the radiator in the cafeteria for warmth.

Tonight is no exception.

It's not an exception for other things too, though all I wish is to be left alone. In peace. But he's summoned me, and as I sneak down the hall, taking slow, careful steps, I can't help but wonder when this will end.

How it started sits vividly in my mind. The beginning of the death of my soul.

Sometimes I wonder if my fate was sealed the second I was born. If the planets aligned in just such a way that even Fate couldn't stop the curse bestowed upon me. To carry something inside that just pulled sickness in my direction. Make it latch on with thick talons, and gnaw at me until all that I am now is flesh to be had. Fed from to appease the dark things that live in the minds of the wicked and cruel.

Marked. I feel marked.

When I reach the heavy door leading to the kitchen, I lean on the metal latch to open it but pause. My gut roils, and my heart skips. I glance around to be sure no one can see me, and push through before I can think further.

Before I can feel anything.

Emotions aren't an option.

This isn't an option.

The sound of canned laughter echoes from the back of the long galley-style kitchen, where he sits and drinks every night. How he manages to consume so much and not be rotting from the inside out, I don't know. Maybe it's because he's never had anything good inside him to begin with. When he sees me, he smiles and pulls out a stool.

"Join me," Cook says, raising a bottle of vodka.

Like I have a choice.

I sit, sliding the bottle my way and fixing my eyes on the TV resting on the metal countertop. The blue glow of the TV flashes in the room, highlighting the pots and pans hanging overhead like a strobe light. Keeping my focus on the bottle of vodka, I raise it to my mouth and take a long pull, then set it back down with a quiet clink.

The only way to get through this is drunk.

"You looked good today at practice," Cook says. "You're improving every day."

I note the appreciative, proud tone. Like he's somehow contributed to the years of hard training and harsh lessons that are slowly turning me into a weapon.

"Thanks," I mumble, wishing this was over already. I'm tired. We trained hard today.

Cook shifts slightly on the stool so our knees brush and says, "Breaker did well too."

“You’d be wise to keep his name out of your mouth,” I say with just enough of a threat behind each word that he is reminded of our deal.

“Ah, yes,” he says, a slick grin cutting across his plain face. “I forgot you don’t like me talking about your little brother.”

Barely thinking, I grip his throat and pull him up from the stool, leaning over him. “That’s enough,” I snarl.

He chokes out a laugh, and I’m bathed in the scent of cheap vodka and sour breath smelling of canned peas. “You’re so protective of the little mite. I think that’s because you like him.”

Rage blurs my vision. I hiss, squeezing his throat harder. “I’m nothing like you.”

He chokes out another laugh. “You’re just like me. At least I can admit it.”

“I should snap your fucking neck right now,” I snarl.

“But you won’t, because you can’t,” Cook says, choking on the last word. The truth of his statement makes me release him. He stumbles backward, chuckling as he rubs his neck. “Besides, you’re too chickenshit. Too worried about that boy.”

I fucking hate this man.

Grinding my teeth, I pick up the bottle and slam back another gulp, wincing at the burn in my throat. With a few more drinks, this itchy feeling under my skin will fade, and I can sink into glorious nothingness.

“I’ll tell Father,” I say, tossing around another idle threat.

Cook leans in, moving closer so his chest brushes mine. “Tell him what?” The words come out in singsong, and I grit my teeth. “He would never believe you. You’re his least favorite. You’re volatile, and you lie. We all know Fallon hates liars.”

I clamp my mouth shut, trapping all my threats, because he’s right. I’m a troublemaker. Growing up, I caused fights. I rarely listened. Grew bored during studies and talked in class. I was terrible at math and languages, barely able to sit still long enough to learn.

Once, when Father put me in solitary after lying, yet again, to cover Breaker’s ass, he told me the only reason he hadn’t removed me from the school was because my vile temper meant I was mean as a snake and didn’t hesitate to retaliate.

I now know, after seeing those files, he was telling me he didn’t kill me because I was an asset as a soldier. Not as a son.

“See?” Cook asks, watching my face as he takes another step closer. His hard cock hits my thigh. He presses it into me, and I feel it grow thicker. My gut churns. “I think the only thing Fallon hates more than liars are men like us. I bet he’d have you removed from the school, and who would protect that sweet little boy?”

My eyes fall closed, nostrils flaring, as I try to control my breathing. Threats. It’s always been threats, and I’m too scared to find out if any of them are true. Too scared because what if he’s right? Who would believe me? I do lie. Constantly. Right to Father’s face. I lie over and over to protect my brothers from their own stupid behavior, and look what it’s done?

Left Reaper fucked in the head and laced with scars.

And me trapped in a sick, twisted deal.

“Besides, Viper,” Cook says, snapping me from my thoughts. I feel him shift closer. Press himself harder to me. “We both know that some deep, dark part of you likes this. Maybe even likes me.”

I huff out a bitter laugh. Little does he know I fucking detest him.

His fingers weave into my hair, and he tugs my head back. He’s shorter than I am, and made of more fat than anything, but the power he has over me makes me reach for him.

“Good boy,” he praises. “On your knees.”

I fall, my knees hitting the cold vinyl floor as I undo his belt. He brushes my hands aside and pulls himself free. The alcohol roils in my stomach and burns my throat. Even though it threatens to come back up, I slide the vodka off the counter, and take another gulp, hissing at the burn. Cook takes the bottle from me, leaning back to guzzle, his small, fat dick bobbing up and down in my face. He sets it down on the metal island and looks down at me, swiping the dribbles of alcohol from his chin as he grips himself.

“Come on,” he says. “Kiss it with that filthy mouth.”

My brain fizzles out. That part of me, that automatic part, takes over, and I do everything he says. Maybe he’s right. I think that’s what I really detest most, maybe even more than him. Because despite the sick feeling inside me, despite the dark layer that feels like evil serpents slithering under my skin, almost like they’re controlling me, my cock gets hard. I take it out when he tells me to, and stroke myself until he’s done.

I don’t finish. I’m glad I don’t. The times I do, I’m left feeling sticky and unclean.

Cook groans and weaves his fingers through my hair, petting my head delicately. Like I’m on my knees because I enjoy this as much as he does.

Maybe I do, and that’s why I keep quiet, and I never protest. Maybe I’m as sick and twisted as he is. I do as asked and tell no one. He slips a piece of paper under my tray when he wants me to visit, and I always arrive right on time. I let him have what he wants. I don’t fight him when he wants to take me in the way that feels most shameful. When he bends me over, when he hurts me, sometimes I swear on purpose, I don’t complain. Sometimes I come even though I feel nothing inside.

There’s never any relief. Ever. Just a numbness that rivals the alcohol, but that never lasts. And then instead of emptiness there’s too much.

Of everything.

When he’s finished, I stand up, gagging, and pull the bottle toward me. I take a big swig to cleanse the taste of him from my mouth.

“Fuck, you’ve gotten good,” he says, tucking himself away. He watches as I shove my still-hard cock back into my pants, pulling the fabric away from my body to zip them up. “Give me that enormous cock so I can suck you off. It’ll be your birthday present.”

I shake my head, my cheeks heating. The handful of times he’s demanded that I remain still so he could, I’ve regretted not punching him in the throat.

“I got lube,” he says with a wink, gesturing to the storeroom off the side of the kitchen.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, wishing I was in bed. “I’m tired.”

“Okay,” he says, pulling the stool back toward the metal counter and plopping down. “Next time I’m not letting you off that easily.”

Not bothering to answer, I make my way through the kitchen, tucking my shirt back in as I go, but freeze at the door when he calls after me.

“By the way, happy birthday,” he says, then hums the happy birthday song as I open the door.

I glance to the right, then move to the left toward our rooms but stop short when I see the tall figure leaning against the wall across the hall, arms

folded over his chest, boots crossed at the ankle.

At first I think it's Hunter, but then Reaper says, "How long has this been going on?"

Panic slams into my chest like a freight train.

In the faint red glow of the emergency lights, his scowl looks ominous. He pushes off the wall and slowly moves toward me, arms still crossed, boots barely making a sound. Ever so casual.

"How long?" he asks again.

I take a deep breath. My first instinct is to deny. Lie my way out of it, but I think he heard too much. I know he did from the way his black eyes bore into me.

"Or should I be asking why?" Reaper lifts his chin toward the door leading to the kitchen. "What's he got on you?"

"Nothing." Cook is right. I'm a fucking liar.

"You're willingly sucking his little cock?" Reaper asks, his hands gripping his biceps so tight, I know he's furious. He knows I'm lying, and panic eats at my middle, worried about what that means. He leans in, getting in my space, and growls, "How long and why?"

"Fifteen," I say immediately because he honestly scares the shit out of me. He's different. Colder than he used to be. That first mission fucked him up pretty badly.

"Fifteen," he repeats as his arms fall to his side.

"And…" I can't even say it. I look at my feet, my heart racing.

"That made Breaker eleven," Reaper says, taking a step back, his voice barely above a whisper. "Or was it Striker?"

My eyes snap to him, and he nods. Like he'd been guessing, and I just confirmed it.

Yes, I want to scream as shame coats my skin like slime. I *let him fuck me. I suck him off. All so he doesn't touch my brothers.*

The threat came after I noticed him looking too long at our brothers. At Striker. Breaker. At all of us. He made an offer, and I was too scared to refuse. As long as I did what he wanted, he would leave my brothers alone. If not, he'd take Breaker or maybe Striker, how and when he wanted. Maybe drug their food. Maybe corner Breaker in the bathrooms. I couldn't watch them every second of the day, he'd said. And if I tried to tell someone, he'd tell our father that I came to him and confessed to secretly wanting to fuck my little brothers.

Considering my past and the constant conversations with Father, I never chanced testing him. I told no one because he's right. I don't think Father would even believe me. Not after scolding me for years every time he's caught me looking at another man a little too long. Not after he's already worried that my sexual preferences may lean in both directions.

Besides, who has that level of bad luck? No one. But me, that is. And even if Father believed me and confronted Cook, he'd deny it. His word against mine. No proof. Just a damaged boy marked by the devil, cursed to endure looks and touches, ruined and at the mercy of whoever wanted him.

I was already stained, and I could save my brother's.

So I agreed.

"Viper." Reaper's hard tone makes me meet his gaze. Rage, bubbling like hot tar, simmers behind his dark eyes. The sight of his anger makes guilt chew at my insides like rats. I don't know why I feel guilty. For lying, I guess. For keeping it from him. Maybe I did because I knew what he'd do, and I don't want him to take any more of my punishments. The cost is far too high.

"Why are you out here?" I ask, sliding around him and heading back toward our block, where our rooms are located. "You're not usually one to sneak around after lights out."

Hunter is, but I don't say that. Hunter has been off since that disastrous first mission and has kept to himself. He's been even quieter and more withdrawn ever since we all returned from the wilderness.

Fuck, so have I. I'll never forget what I saw that day.

"Strike had another nightmare," he says, following behind me. "I went to wake him up when I saw you sneaking out."

"So you decided to follow me and listen in like a pervert?" I ask, turning down the hall that holds our rooms.

"I'm not the pervert," Reaper says. My insides drip with fear of his next few words. I don't think I can handle them. If Reaper thinks I'm—

He grabs my arm, spinning me to face him so violently that I stumble into him. For a second, I'm so stunned I can't speak, much less pull from his hard grasp.

"Cook is a pervert." He leans in close to my face, towering over me. In the darkness, he's just black eyes and shadowy hate. "He's not allowed to touch you ever again."

I pull from his grasp and take a shuddering breath. Reaper's a scary motherfucker when he wants to be.

"Keep your mouth shut," I tell him. "It's none of your business."

"*You're* my business."

I stalk away, leaving him, and shove my door open, letting it slam, not caring if I wake everyone in the block. There's barely anyone left. It's just the five of us, and Cook and Teacher and that old man who cleans.

We're the only ones left.

I strip off my clothes, leaving on just my boxers, my head swimming, and lie down on the bottom bunk. My skin feels overheated. My bones hollow. I feel hollow. Empty.

Reaper's deadly expression follows me into sleep, and I move in and out of consciousness for most of the night. Restless and uneasy. I must have fallen asleep for a bit because I'm woken by a scream.

I bolt upright, and my head crashes into the underside of the bottom bunk.

"What's that?" Breaker asks, climbing down from the top bunk. He must have sneaked in here when I was out.

"Fuck if I know," I say, rubbing my head. "Cook probably found another rat."

Breaker rushes to the door and peeks out, then looks at me, smoothing the wrinkles from his uniform pants. "I don't think so." He pulls the door open all the way and slips into the hall.

I take a minute to sort myself out. My head pounds, and my stomach feels like I drank battery acid, but I grab my pants and slip them on and pull on my shirt as I reach the door and spot Striker walking to the end of the hall.

"What's going on?" I ask, but he just shrugs and keeps moving.

Pulling my boots on, I rush through the door. I grip Striker's shoulder and shove him back toward my room. Another scream echoes through the hall.

"Wait in my room," I tell Striker, then reach for Breaker, grabbing his shirt by the collar, tugging him back. "Both of you wait here while I go look."

"Come on," Breaker whines. "That's bullshit."

More shouts echo down the hall, and Striker's head snaps in that direction. "It's got to be something good if Father is yelling like that."

“Wait in my room,” I bark out, pointing at the rusted metal door. “Now.”

Breaker sighs, and Striker shoots me a stern glare but tugs our little brother with him into my room.

“If you come out, I’m taking your food for a week,” I call over my shoulder and stalk down the hall.

As I round the corner that leads to the cafeteria, I hear Fallon barking orders and Teacher screaming something unintelligible.

Then I see it.

Red. Everywhere.

It splatters on the wall, gathers in a thick puddle around bare feet.

Feet I recognize.

“Who did this?” Fallon asks, his voice echoing down the hall. He looks at me and then at the pool of blood next to his boots.

I inch forward, my heart hammering. Bile rises in my throat, because I already know what I’m going to see.

Who I’m going to see.

My head spins. I shift slightly so I can see past Fallon’s body blocking my view, and the second my eyes land on him, I freeze. My hand shakes as I press it to my stomach, willing the contents to stay down.

Cook’s body slouches against the wall, his arms loose at his sides, his head drooped off to the left. He could be sleeping one off, like he has many times before, if it weren’t for the blood. It covers his pants, soaks his shirt.

And the fact his throat has been slashed.

And his hands are cut off and sitting in his lap.

“Damn,” Hunter whispers from behind me. He steps up next to me, arms crossed, head tilted to the side, inspecting. “That’s messy.”

“Who. Did. This,” Fallon asks again, his tone deadly.

“I did,” Hunter says, sauntering forward, and clasps a hand on Fallon’s shoulder.

Liar. They are always protecting one another. That’s what they do.

That’s what we all do.

Fallon doesn’t remove his hand but turns to face him. “Why?”

Hunter leans in and stage whispers, “He tried to touch my cock. Said he’s dreamed of my little dick since I was a boy. So I cut off his hands.”

Fallon’s gaze immediately snaps to me, and my breathing stops. He breaks our gaze after a heartbeat then gestures to Cook’s body. “Clean this

up," he tells Hunter. "Throw the mess in the incinerator." Fallon points at me. "Get your brothers and stay in your room."

"Yes, sir," I say and take a step back.

"Viper." Father's hard tone makes my blood curdle. His jaw pops as he eyes me, his hands on his hips. When he breaks eye contact, his gaze drops to his feet, and it feels like time stills. I brace myself for it. The harsh words. The accusations. But when Father drags his eyes back up to me, I see nothing but a flash of softness before he covers it up. He points to Cook's mutilated body. "Not a word of this to anyone."

Father spins and stalks down the hall, not looking back.

My insides squirm, bile threatening to spew all over the floor. I clutch my stomach and stalk back down the hall toward my room.

"What's happening?" Striker shouts. "Why was everyone yelling?"

I look up and find Reaper leaned against the wall outside my room, Striker's head peeking out from the open door.

"Nothing," I choke out, my focus locked on Reaper as I approach. A tingling sensation ripples down my spine, then spreads, flooding my hands. It feels a lot like panic. I rip my focus from Reaper and say to Striker, "Go to your rooms and stay until Father calls us for breakfast."

My little brothers inch out of my room, both glancing down the hall as they go.

"*Go*," I yell.

Once they are in their rooms, I march forward. Reaper pushes off the wall right as I step up to my door and blocks the entrance. I crash into his hard chest and stumble back, but he catches my arm. Reaper releases me, then slides to the side, unblocking my path, but I'm frozen in place. His eyes drift down the hall where, just out of sight, Cook's mutilated body lies in a heap.

He rubs the scars on his lips, like he's thinking. "Looks like we need a new cook," he says and then brushes past me.

I don't follow him.

I don't question.

I don't look back as I walk back into my room, a strange relief flooding me.

This is who and what Reaper is.

He protects us at all costs.

He is death and vengeance wrapped up in a man's body.

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Chapter 35

Delilah

"NO," FALLON SNAPS.

My entire body reacts to his sharp tone, jerking away from him, but he's looming behind me, crowding my space. My eyes dart to Reaper by the door. He remains still, not interrupting once since we've been down here.

Which has been hours.

"Say it again," Fallon instructs coldly, forcing my attention back to him. "And make sure it's correct."

I suck in a breath and release it slowly, trying to tame my racing heart. My hands shake, and I clasp them together in my lap and close my eyes, doing my best to keep myself and my voice from trembling. Now that I know the depths that Fallon will go to, I am even more terrified of him than before.

Fallon's palm slaps the table, jolting me from my thoughts. "Answer."

I clear my throat, my gaze darting to Reaper again. "I don't know where I was."

Reaper's slight nod warms my chest. The fact that he's calmly standing by while Fallon yells at me, knowing what he did, tells me that these interrogations to prepare me for Rune are vital. He'd never allow Fallon to behave like this otherwise.

"Describe the terrain," Fallon says, and I sense him back away.

Another deep breath doesn't help unravel the vise clamping my stomach. All I want is to go back to my room and curl up in my bed. Curl up with Striker and Reaper and forget everything as they pleasure me again.

Fallon's harsh smack to the tabletop snaps me from the fantasy. I pinch the bridge of my nose. "It was cold—"

"That's not terrain," Fallon interjects, hand slapping down on the table again. "I said terrain."

I lick my lips, losing the battle with my nerves. A light tremble moves through my shoulders, and I breathe in, fighting tears. "It was by the ocean. Rocky."

"What color was the water?"

"Murky. Dark blue."

"Any woods?"

I shake my head, picturing the marsh as I lie. "Just a marsh."

"Where did they keep you?"

"In an old house. They kept me away from Cora, then they put us in a room together." That is the truth, so it will be the easiest part of the story to tell Rune. Fallon told me that Clyde gave him the rundown of what she said when she returned.

"How big was the house?"

To make it believable, you have to believe it too. That's what Fallon said the first day they brought me down here and gave me a list of things I'm to tell Rune when I go back.

"Tell me about the house, Delilah," Fallon says, making my focus snap to him. His tone is suddenly gentle, so at odds with his entire body language. But this is what he does. Disarms with charm, then moves in to strike when he thinks there's a crack.

I swallow, sitting up straight in my chair, and look him dead in the eye. "Big. It was run down with lots of rooms, but I didn't see all of them."

"What style?"

"I don't know," I snap. "I'm not a fucking architect."

"Good," Fallon praises. His hand lands on my head, and I resist the urge to move away from him. "Always redirect Rune's questions with anger. Remember when they question you, you are angry. Furious that you were taken and kept for so long with no understanding of why." He pulls a chair from the table. The legs scream across the floor, and the sound makes my already too strung out nerves shriek too. He sits across from me and

folds his hands on the table. Calm. Collected. Like he didn't aim a gun at me and admit to murdering children and abusing his sons just a day ago. "Now tell me what the men look like."

"I don't know," I say, and it's mostly true. "They wore masks. I never saw their faces."

"What did they tell you?"

"Nothing. They barely spoke to me. Just gave me food and made me stay in a room. I was only let outside once a day."

Fallon nods. "Cry."

"Excuse me?"

"You need to cry," he says. "To make it believable."

My laugh is bitter. "My father doesn't care about tears."

"Yet, you cry when you are frustrated," Fallon says. "I've watched you for an entire week. And I've seen the video footage. I know how you work."

My cheeks flame as my gaze darts to Reaper, my mind automatically conjuring up the image of us all together.

"Don't fret," Fallon says. "I haven't seen past footage of you with my sons. I'd never violate your privacy in that way."

"Just her safety and her life," Reaper grates, eyes shooting daggers at his father's back.

Fallon ignores Reaper's outburst and continues as if he didn't speak, "When you become overwhelmed, angry, or frustrated, you cry. To make this believable, you need to be consistent."

I'm about to cry right now, thinking about Fallon seeing me in any capacity with the men, paying close attention to all the subtle signs of just how intimate we have become. Not just on a physical level but deeper. Knowing Fallon pays attention to the way Reaper is with me, how he touches me, makes me glad Cora isn't here.

Cora.

I clench my teeth and meet his eyes.

This is for Cora.

All of this is for her.

For them.

I bite my lip and squeeze my eyes shut, picturing her beautiful face. Her mischievous smile. How she throws her head back and laughs with her whole body. I picture small boys trapped in a school with a quiet evil.

Terrified and alone while the devil in a three-piece suit threatens to kill them. My breathing grows irregular. Tears sting my eyes, and I let a few fall. They trail down my cheek and hit my collarbone. My heart cracks when I think about the real possibility that if I don't convince Rune, if I fail, I won't make it out alive and I'll never see Cora happy and free.

I'll never see the men free from the sick control of the man before me.

I open my eyes. Fallon's lip quirks into a devilish grin.

"Very good," he says gently. "I can see you finally understand."

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I step out of the shower, snatching a towel from the rack, and dry off. My clothes hang on the metal rod along with a fresh towel, and the thought passes through my head.

Who does the laundry?

I imagine Reaper gathering dirty uniforms, and my dresses, and stuffing them in a washing machine, along with all their masks. A chuckle slips out, echoing in the bathroom, and I slump down to the floor, tears pricking my eyes.

I'm fucking losing my mind in this loneliness.

The weeks prior didn't feel as desolate as this past week. Even stuck in this room alone for that first week after they took us, the isolation didn't stick to me quite like it does now. I was too scared. Too unaware. Now I know too much, and I'm left to sit with all this knowledge, by myself.

Sit with all these expectations.

What if I can't do it? What if the moment I'm faced with killing Rune, I can't pull the trigger?

A loud knock on the bathroom door rips a scream from my throat.

"You have ten minutes," a deep voice says. 33? I can't remember. Every day, the two guards who escort me around the mansion change, and I don't have enough energy to care to store away who is who.

"Chow time," another says, and I recognize the voice. 48.

"I already ate," I snap back.

"Looks like you're eating again."

"Hold on." With a sigh, I stand and dress. It isn't until I'm snapping my bra that I realize I forgot to grab underwear. I cast a glance at my sweaty

leggings and undergarments and decide I’m better off without any, then pull on my socks and boots, tucking my knife away.

Another pound on the door makes my shoulders bunch as I quickly run a brush through my wet hair. When I open the door, the two soldiers step back, their eyes moving over me.

I don’t like these soldiers. Any of them, really. They look too much. Even 48, who doesn’t have a menacing air about him, drags his eyes over me a tad too often.

My belly dips. Though I know they can’t see I’m not wearing panties under my long dress, I still feel exposed and vulnerable.

“Come on,” 48 says, gesturing for me to follow his fellow soldier.

It’s times like this that I feel like a prisoner. Every time they escort me, command me to follow them, I’m reminded I have no control over my life.

Fallon does.

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Chapter 36

Delilah

WHEN WE ENTER THE dining room, I freeze. Seems Fallon has decided to change things up.

There are two place settings with delicate china and ornate silverware, crystal wine glasses, tall water glasses, and white napkins. A large platter with a dark, rich-looking chocolate cake sits near the head of the table.

“Please, sit.” Fallon gestures to the chair he’s pulled out next to the head of the table. “Join me.”

I take a hesitant step forward, noting the bottle of wine and the fact Reaper and Striker aren’t here. The last thing I want is to be alone with Fallon again.

“You are dismissed,” Fallon tells the two soldiers, as I take the seat.

“Where are they?” I ask.

Fallon sits at the head of the table, unfolding the napkin and placing it on his lap. “If by they, you mean my sons, they are making rounds ensuring the grounds are secure.” He leans over and picks up a knife, then cuts into the cake. “Besides, I wanted to speak to you in private.”

My nerves bundle up in my belly as he serves me, loading my plate with a thick slice of cake. The last time his sons were occupied, and I was alone with Fallon, I ended up with a gun aimed at my head.

Not that I think Fallon will kill me. He needs me. That much is clear now. But I don’t trust him. Every move he makes is laced with ill intent.

Fallon serves himself, then pours wine into each glass. He gestures to my plate. “Please enjoy.”

Carefully, I reach for the fork, half expecting Fallon to lash out and stab my hand with his fork. If I’ve learned anything from him, it’s that he’s unpredictable. For all I know, this could be some other lesson I’m about to learn.

Or retaliation for standing up to him and calling his bluff.

When he doesn’t do anything, I take a small bite and nearly melt as the smooth, rich taste floods my tongue. It’s been over a week since I’ve had anything other than mushy oatmeal and handheld foods, and I groan as I take another bite, savoring the delicate sweetness.

I feel Fallon’s eyes on me as I shovel another bite into my mouth. “Slow down, or you’ll end up sick.”

I swallow my bite and lower my fork to my plate, my cheeks warming. How this man can make me feel constantly inferior and small with just a few words is beyond me.

“When Viper was a boy, he had the worst sweet tooth,” Fallon says. A faint smile touches his lips and for a heartbeat, I could almost pretend that he actually loves his sons. Almost. When he catches me staring, his smile grows wider, and he cuts into his cake. “He was such an innocent boy in many ways. But not in others.”

“He was six,” I snap. “Of course he was innocent.”

“Exactly,” Fallon nods. “Children are innocent. Until they are not.”

“Children are always innocent,” I say sharply, my hatred toward him growing.

“Innocence is subjective,” Fallon says.

My stomach twists. “A child’s innocence is never subjective. They either have it stolen by men like you, or harsh truths are forced on them.”

He chuckles again, darker. Like he’s enjoying this sick exchange. Like he’s toying with me. “You watched your mother die on a sidewalk on your birthday,” Fallon says. I clench my teeth, my heart fluttering weirdly, my insides screaming, hating that he has such intimate knowledge of me. “Would you say Sofia’s death stole a piece of your innocence?”

“Whoever murdered her stole my mother and my innocence,” I snap.

“Did they though? You still remained innocent. Naïve to the ways of the world. To the way your father worked. How he ran his business, the things he did to keep it.”

“I was a child.”

“But even as an adult, you remained naïve. Or should I say, you chose willful ignorance,” Fallon says. “It’s easier than addressing the fact that you helped him hide his crimes, so don’t blame yourself.”

“I don’t,” I say, even though I do exactly that. Blame myself because I did lie to myself. Turn a blind eye. Refuse to acknowledge anything around me, much less how it affected me. I walk through life numb and robotic because it’s easier, like he said. Easier than admitting that I am trapped by powerful men, forced to do their bidding.

I still am.

I grind my jaw, knowing Fallon is watching me, knowing my inner struggle.

Because he led me here.

“Tell me, Delilah, do you think a part of Cora’s innocence was taken when her mother and father died?”

“She was orphaned,” I say. “They died in a car accident. That’s different.”

“Yes. The accident. So tragic.” He chuckles. “Are you aware of what Caroline did?”

“If you mean she betrayed my father on a business deal, then yes,” I say. “Everyone knows that.”

Fallon locks his eyes with mine. “Naivety is deadly.”

I swallow, not sure what to make of his expression. It’s dark, but he’s so calculated with everything he does, I’m not sure of what he wants me to see. He’s taken this conversation in so many directions my head feels clogged with too many words and too much subtext.

“Deadly and dangerous,” Fallon says. “As is a lack of control. Yesterday proved that you allow your emotions to control you. This must stop.”

Instead of responding, I reach for my wineglass and take a sip. The dark, rosy notes hit my tongue, and I take another.

“It is crucial that you keep your emotions in check,” Fallon says. “You have only a week before your return.”

The glass rattles as it hits the table. “You mean…” My voice trails off. Why didn’t the men tell me? Maybe they couldn’t.

My stomach dips, the rich cake turning sour and heavy.

I’m going back. To Rune. I’ll have to face him. Lie to him. Pretend I don’t know what he does at that lodge.

Pretend I don’t know about Cora.

The reality of what I’m expected to do crashes into me, and my heart picks up pace. My face flushes. Needles prick at my fingertips. I take a deep breath, but it doesn’t help.

“Breathe,” Fallon says. “Drink water.”

With a shaky hand, I pick up the tall water glass and take a sip, but the fingers of panic wrap around my neck and squeeze, making it too hard to swallow.

“I don’t need to tell you that when you return, it will be difficult,” Fallon says. “You will be questioned, doubted, and will have to prove to Rune that you are loyal to him.”

I nod, but can’t seem to make any words form.

If I fail, I’m dead. We all know it.

“I believe you will succeed. There is too much at stake.” He pats my hand. My gaze darts to where he touched me, and I pull my hands to my lap, swiping my thumb over the skin to remove the slithering sensation. “It is vital that when you meet with the Snyder Group to go over the contract, you ensure you receive an invitation to join them at the lodge.”

It takes a second for his words to sink in, and when they do, my head snaps in his direction. I stare dumbly at him, my mind whirling. All the fragments of information I’ve been told over the last few weeks fall into place.

The hotel chain. Snyder. The deal. The weapons. The night at the club.

They planned this.

Every minor detail has been planned.

I press my fingers to my neck, rubbing at my skittering pulse. “The weapons.”

“Yes, the Snyder Group sold Rune the weapons, and continues to do so.” Fallon picks up his wineglass and takes a sip, watching my reaction.

I knew something was off, that we were spending way too much money for a chain of hotels, but it was my job to hide Rune’s deals, not question him. The image of the video feed and the man with the sunglasses and arrogant smile flashes in my head.

Breaker. It was Breaker.

Cora…

Does Cora know?

I ask him just that.

“She’s been made aware,” Fallon says cryptically.

“So she is aware of the plan?” I ask, my throat suddenly tight again, but not for the same reasons. “Is she aware…”

“Reaper explained you kept Rune’s activities a secret from her,” Fallon says. “Cora has not been told the extent of what Rune does. And as far as I know, she hasn’t been informed of the full plan.”

The full plan being me somehow getting into Rune’s lodge. I take a breath and relax some, but then stiffen again. How am I supposed to get to his lodge after years of refusing to go? I’ve spent my entire adult life teasing him about his boy’s club, about his obsession with going for a week or two every year, whenever Zane invited me to go.

Wait.

Zane knows.

Zane participates.

“Zane knows, doesn’t he?” I say. The words slip out in a horrified whisper.

Of course he knows. Everyone who steps foot in Rune’s lodge would know. My stomach roils, and I bolt up from my seat, pressing my hand to my belly.

Zane invited me. Often. What if I had said yes? What if I had seen what Rune did and refused to be a part of it? Because I would have. I’d never partake in the hunting of people. The barbaric, evil dismembering and deaths of the people I saw in those images.

Cora. God, they sent her to him.

“You sent her back to marry him,” I whisper, my hands shaking. “You sent her back, knowing what, who he is. To that monster.”

Fallon rises and places a hand on my shoulder. “Reaper, explain—” he begins, but I brush him off and take a step back.

She can never find out. If Cora discovers what Rune does, what Zane does, what the men knowingly sent her back to, she’d be devastated.

I’m devastated.

My fingers curl into the fabric over my chest like I can rip this pain out of me. It doesn’t matter that they had no choice. Anger sometimes has

no logic, and right now, I want to punch each of them in the face for keeping this from me.

“Sit,” Fallon barks out. “Your constant theatrics wear on me, Delilah.”

Taking a deep breath, I remind myself that I need to keep my temper under control. This is a game I’m forced to play, and if I don’t follow the rules, I won’t just be the one suffering the consequences. We all will.

Slowly, I lower myself to the seat and place my hands on the table, shoving my anger aside. I know they had to follow Fallon’s commands to send her back. They tried and failed and found another way to keep us safe.

“Your father has been in contact with me,” he says.

My breath whooshes from my lungs. “For how long?” I ask. I had thought that he never bothered to contact Fallon. But it appears I was wrong. Why didn’t they tell me? Maybe because they didn’t want to give me false hope. They weren’t sending me back. Not until I was ready. Not until I was prepared to end Rune’s life.

Not until they owned my mind and my heart.

“A few days after my sons took you. Two to be exact.” He sees my expression, hears the disbelief in my gasp. “Rune was cleaning up quite the mess I made in his lobby.” He cocks his head to the side. “Believe it or not, it takes time to bribe police, pay off or dispose of employees who ask too many questions—”

“Dispose?” I think of the receptionists there that day, and my gut churns. I shake my head to refocus. “What did Rune say?”

“He offered me money.” A slight chuckle leaves him. Like he can’t believe my father offered to pay a ransom to kidnappers. “Rune thinks life has a price.”

“Doesn’t it?” I ask.

Those cold, ice-colored eyes assess me. “Does it? I believe life is priceless.”

“Says the man who murdered boys and sends his sons to kill and kidnap people for a hefty fee.”

His lip quirks at the corner. “I merely cash in on other’s greed.” Fallon leans back in his chair. “The people who hire me want something, and they are willing to pay for it.”

“My father wants me back, and he’s willing to pay,” I say, “so why not let him think that?”

“Is he willing, though?” Fallon asks.

“You said he contacted you, offering money.”

He makes a strange sound. “Tell me, Delilah. What’s more valuable? A mother or a child?”

“What kind of question is that?” I ask. “They are both valuable.”

“Indeed,” he agrees. “Yet if you had to choose, which one would you say is more valuable?”

“The child,” I say.

“Some would say the mother. After all, children die every day.” His strange expression creates goosebumps on my arms. “But a mother can always bear another child.”

I suck in a breath, appalled. “You’re saying to choose to kill the child because the mother could have another?”

He gives me a faint, tight smile. “Tell me then, knowing everything you know now, would you go back and choose your life over your mother’s?”

I press my lips together watching him. He’s playing some game with me, and I don’t know where he’s going with this. “If I could go back in time, I would choose neither of us.”

“Not an option, Delilah,” Fallon says. “Choose. You live, and you end up here, knowing all this, and return to kill Rune. Or you die, and you never learn what he is, and he continues.”

What he is. A rapist. A murderer.

“Have you ever considered that my mother’s death led Rune down this path?” I ask. “He went mad, just as you said.”

“I think about it every single day,” he says, hands folding in his lap. “Now, pay attention. I’m about to tell you exactly what I expect you to do when you return to Rune.”

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Chapter 37

Delilah

MY HEAD ACHES. I rub my eyes, willing the tears to stop. I've never cried this much. Not even after I watched my mother's casket lower into the ground and I was forced to toss dirt in her grave. Tears meant weakness, and there was no room for that. Not even for a little girl in mourning.

Since coming here, I've cried so many tears over all the loss. But now the tears stem from the reality that this is all true. And with the tears, anger sprouts like poisonous weeds in my chest.

Fallon answered my questions, outlining the plan before telling me I could walk freely around, but to keep close to the house if I went outside, and never, never wander past the gardens alone.

Of course, I came out here, to Cora's little garden with the herbs and half-dead plants, to digest what he told me.

While their plan seems complex, it's quite simple. I return and do what I've always done. Set up sales, hide money, and meet with clients. Give Rune advice. Be the daughter he taught how to be just as ruthless as him.

Be ready to do whatever he asks.

Including joining him at his lodge, along with the Snyder Group. The men spent years—the same years they watched Cora and me—infiltrating Rune's inner circle. Now that they have gained an invitation to Rune's lodge, it's my job to ensure they are accepted and have Rune's full trust.

Then get us all into that lodge and access to the weapons, by any means necessary.

How?

That one is up to me.

“You’re not supposed to be out here,” a deep voice says from behind me. I start, my hands gripping my jacket as I spin. 57 stands in the doorway to the kitchen, hands in his pockets, mask removed.

I was right. He’s blonde. But I wasn’t expecting the weak chin or the thin lips that pull down at the corner like he has a permanent frown.

Then again, if I was raised by Fallon, I’d be mad too.

“Fallon said I can walk around freely,” I tell him. “Go ask him.”

My heart kicks when a smile curls his lip. The dim glow of the little light hanging by the back door turns his features harsh, bringing out the dark black bruising under his eyes. Sinister in a way that creates a crawling feeling under my skin.

“Is that so?” he asks, taking a step forward.

Every single instinct in me screams to move away, but I dig my boots into the marble chips lining the path of the back garden and stand up straighter. I came out here to be alone. To be closer to Cora. She loved it out here, tending the little garden beds.

I’m going to see her soon. My heart both swells at the thought and desperately aches.

“You can leave,” I say. “Go find Fallon, and he’ll confirm what I said.”

He makes a sound in his throat as his boot slides forward, and he takes the first step down. “I should bring you with me.” He winks as another smile cuts across his face. “Just in case.”

“I’ll just return to my room,” I say, not liking how his gaze drags over my body. Like he’s just waiting for this exact moment to have me alone.

He takes another step down, and his boots crunch on the gravel as he ambles forward, hands in the pockets of his black fatigues.

This time I take a step back.

“I’ll escort you,” he says. “Make sure you get there safely.”

My senses scream to run with how the words slip past his lips. Darkly lined with something worse than sinister. With a layer of hatred that makes the hair on my arms stand up.

“Unnecessary,” I tell him, doing my best to keep my voice even. I’ve been leered at, catcalled many times in my life, but my father’s name kept me safe.

Right now I know I’m not.

“Heard you like spreading your legs,” he says, and my heart-rate spikes. “Heard you take it with no complaints.”

My skin ices over. I take another step back, keeping my focus on him, suddenly all too aware of my lack of underwear. Not that the flimsy fabric would keep me safe, but the vulnerability that moves through me makes me press my legs together.

“Stay away from me,” I say, moving to the left.

He darts in my path, and my throat squeezes. I chance a quick glance at the back door, wishing someone, anyone, would come out here. The only exits from the little walled garden are the back door and the iron gate behind me.

“Get out of my way,” I say, taking a step to the side, debating if I should run past him or make a run for the gate.

Don’t turn your back on an enemy. Reaper has spent the last week instilling that into my head. I cross off the idea and focus on the man blocking my escape.

“Be careful,” I warn. “Fallon and his sons won’t like hearing you kept me from returning to my room.”

He lets out a cruel laugh, the sound cutting through me. “Fallon’s sons can’t touch me,” he snarls, and takes another step toward me. I widen my stance, feet shoulder-width apart, and angle my body like I’ve been taught.

There is less to hit. Think of a boxer, light on their feet, always ready to move. Keep them in your sights at all times. Watch how they move. Their arrogance is what takes them down. Find their weakness and exploit it.

He shifts toward me, and I move away. My little knife digs into my ankle. Relief floods me. I was so scared that I forgot I had it.

So much for all the training.

“Come on,” he says with a slick wink as he grabs his crotch. “We can make this easy, and I won’t hurt you.”

“I’ll fucking hurt *you*,” I spit out, my stomach souring. “Lay a fucking hand on me and I’ll take your left nut.”

He laughs. Actually laughs and then he lunges forward.

Every single ounce of training, all the moves they taught me, all the sweat and bruises, flees as terror floods my system.

He grips my hair, and I instinctively fall to my knees, punching out wildly. He wails as I land a hit near his groin, then I jerk back as a fist lands on my lips. The shock of pain explodes across my face, and my mouth fills with wet copper. The hit stuns me for a heartbeat, but as he grips my arm and twists, I reach for my boot. My fingers slip around the handle of the knife. Before I can pull it free, another hit snaps my head back and I fall to the gravel.

Then he's on me. A hand clamps around my throat, squeezing. He moves between my thighs even as I try to kick him away. Another strike to my face makes my nose burn. My vision blurs. His other hand grips my dress and moves it up. Cold night air blasts over my exposed skin.

"I knew you were a little whore," he rasps, rank breaths fanning over my face. His hand delves between my legs, and when his fingers thrust into me, a scream rips free of my throat.

"Fuck yeah, scream for me, nasty bitch," he grates. His hand presses down harder on my throat, and I grip his fingers, trying to pry him off as my air gets cut off. His other hand withdraws from between my legs, but then I hear his belt buckle clink, then feel his hardness hit my center.

The realization of what is about to happen makes me freeze.

Stay calm. Even if they are bigger than you, you can get away.

I stiffen my legs.

Stay calm.

His dick slips over my core, and I bring my knee up, which just gives him better access, but I reach down, my fingers slipping along my calf until I reach my boot. He reaches between our bodies, easing his grip on my throat as he aligns his dick to my entrance.

Tears prick my eyes, and I will myself to stay calm as I wrap my fingers around the hilt of the blade. He pushes forward as the little knife pulls free and with a flick of my wrist, the blade springs open, and I drive it down.

His scream cuts through the garden as the knife plunges into his shoulder blade. He releases my neck, his back arching as he reaches for the knife in his back. Keeping my death grip on the hilt, I use every ounce of strength and roll to the side, flipping him off me. The knife pulls from his back as we roll, and I twist it in my palm, and angle it downward.

It plunges into the side of his neck, and his eyes widen. Blood splatters my face. I shove him off, my grip on the knife loosening, and he drops to his back, one hand over his neck, gurgling sounds escaping.

I fall to my ass, gulping down air, watching as he gasps, eyes wide and pinned on me.

Hands clasp my arms, and I scream, kicking and punching, but his deep voice grates across my skin, centering me.

“It’s okay,” Striker says, pulling me back. I turn and bury my face in his chest, gripping his shirt.

“I fucking warned you.” Reaper’s dark growl draws my attention. I turn to find him standing over 57. “You have roughly sixty-seconds before you die, and I’m going to make sure you suffer each and every one of them right before I send you to hell.”

He pulls the little knife free of his neck, and grips 57’s hand and pins it to the ground. Reaper presses the blade against the skin. 57’s gurgling scream cuts like broken glass through the garden.

“What do we do to vile creatures who take what isn’t theirs?” Reaper growls, voice nothing but violence.

“We cut off their hands,” Striker says, letting me go and stalking forward. He grips 57’s other arm and slams it to the ground, using his boot to keep it pinned to the gravel. Another scream rips from the soldier’s throat as Striker leans down, pulling the large serrated knife from his belt.

My hand flies to my mouth as he slams the blade down onto the soft skin at the wrist. Blood coats the blade. Pours onto the grass. A strangled scream fills the garden. Reaper draws his hand back and slams my little knife down into 57’s wrist, then yanks it free. With a chopping motion, Reaper hacks, over and over, slick wet sounds making my stomach roil.

I stare in horror, unable to look away until Striker kicks the severed hand away. I draw my knees to my chest, numbness creeping into my veins as Reaper slowly hacks at the wrist. Methodically. Sawing ruthlessly through layers of flesh with the small blade.

It’s not until he’s sawed the hand off that Reaper stops, tossing the mess aside, that I realize 57 isn’t moving.

Reaper stands, glimmering blood staining his arms. Splattered up on his mask.

“Go tell Father what his soldier did,” he tells Striker, his eyes never leaving mine. “His fucking soldiers can deal with this mess.”

My gaze shifts to Striker. He swipes the blade clean on 57's pants, then sheaths his knife, his chest heaving, and casts me a look before walking inside.

Reaper moves toward me. I scramble backward, and he freezes.

I gather my dress and press it between my legs, an oily feeling moving through me from the memory of the soldier's vile hands. From the feel of his dick slipping over me, so close to violating me. An anguished cry slips free of my throat.

Reaper snarls and takes another step toward me.

"He didn't," I say, barely able to breathe around the adrenaline coursing through my system. "I stabbed him before he could."

"Good." Reaper holds out his bloody hand, and this time I lean forward, and take it. I stand on wobbly legs with his help. My gaze falls to the dead man, the one I helped kill, sprawled out on the blood-soaked gravel, his cut-off hands lying nearby.

"I killed him." My knees grow weak.

"He deserved it." Reaper's low rumbling growl moves through me as he dips and gathers me in his arms. I press my face to his chest, blood smearing over my cheek as I wrap my arms around his neck. A choked sob escapes, and he grips me harder, pressing me to him like if he holds me tight enough, he can tuck me away under his skin.

"You just cut off his hands," I whisper. "You…"

"That will teach anyone who dares touch you what happens when they try to take what's mine."

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Chapter 38

Delilah

BARELY ANY LIGHT BLEEDS through the window as he carries me through the door of my bedroom. The moonless night turns the furniture a dark blue hue and thickens the shadows. With his boot, Reaper kicks the door closed, and the sound shoots through me like a gunshot. I squeeze him tighter, burying my face in his neck, sucking in breaths, trying to calm my racing heart.

On the way up here, we didn't come across any other of Fallon's soldiers as he carried me through the house and up the stairs. Some remote part of my brain registers the oddness of that, but I'm barely hanging on to my sanity to think too long about it.

I killed a man.

Or at least I helped.

My pulse jumps at the thought, and images of what just happened scatter in my head like dry leaves. I bite my lip, but wince at the sting of pain from where he struck me. My chin quivers, and I squeeze Reaper closer, focusing on how it feels to be in his arms rather than the mess of emotions swirling through me.

There is a part of me that is terrified of what I saw him do. What Striker did. But I think I'm more scared of the thought that passes through my mind.

I'm glad they ended him so horribly.

I’m glad that disgusting man’s last moments were filled with terror and pain.

The vision of Reaper and Striker chopping his hands off makes my throat tight, but numbness creeps through my limbs as he carries me across the room to the bathroom. Carefully, he sets me down, and my boots hit the tile floor with a quiet tap. Reaper switches the light on, and the gold-tinted tungsten light has me blinking, but then I catch sight of Reaper in the full bright light, and I gasp.

Blood splatters the white skull of his mask, dampens his black shirt. Bits of what I assume are flesh cling to him. My stomach twists. I stumble back, my hand to my mouth, and race for the toilet. What little food I ate earlier expels from my body in a rush.

“It’s okay,” he whispers as he gathers my hair, holding it back. “Your body is trying to rid itself of the adrenaline.”

I gag again, my stomach heaving. I grip the toilet, my arms shaking. A violent trembling starts in my shoulders and moves to my legs.

“Come here,” Reaper says, pulling me up. He flushes the toilet and then closes the lid, pushing me down until I sit. He crouches before me, and lifts my foot, removing one boot and sock, then the other, setting them aside before standing. The water from the faucet as he turns it on blasts through the quiet room and into my bones. He washes his hands, scrubbing them with soap to remove the blood, then grabs a washcloth and runs it under the faucet. The cool rag hits the side of my neck. “You’re going into shock.”

He swipes at my neck and it comes away red. I blink, staring at the washcloth, my gaze dragging over to his blood-soaked sleeve, then to his chest.

“Look at me.”

My gaze travels from the gore splattered on his shirt to his black eyes.

“You need to lie down before you pass out,” he says.

I shake my head as he pulls me up and tries to guide me from the bathroom. When I jerk in his grasp, he lets me go and takes a step back. His eyes drop to my dress and then lower. Suddenly I’m aware I’m clutching the material to the space between my thighs.

He growls, this animalistic sound of fury, and drops his head back to look up at the ceiling. Squeezing my eyes shut, I spin to face the sink. When they open, they land on the rag he had pressed to my neck, stained red. With

a trembling hand, I reach for the faucet and turn it on, and that's when I see the blood. My hand is covered with it.

Frantically, I pass my hands under the running water, raking my nails over my skin. My mouth sours as crimson water rushes down the drain. When the water runs clear, I grab my toothbrush and toothpaste and brush my teeth. My lip stings from the minty paste, and I wince, but the cool mint seems to snap my brain to center, the images of the severed hands, blood and gore slowing, no longer a looping kaleidoscope nightmare but one solid image.

"Delilah." Reaper's voice crashes through the room, and I jolt. My eyes dart up to meet his in the mirror. "We need to remove your clothes."

I glance down at my dress, the black jacket, and see the blood. My toothbrush drops, and I spit out the paste into the sink, staring in horror at the blood. I'm covered in it. It gleams on my jacket in the bright tungsten lights of the bathroom, smears the front of my dress. Stains the dress skirt from where it had been gathered up round my hips.

Panic slams into me, and I rip at my clothes, trying to get out of them as quickly as possible. Reaper's hand covers mine, and the panic needling through me halts.

"Let me," he says softly.

My bones melt at his gentle tone, and I go loose, letting him slide my arms free. I watch his eyes as he grips my shoulder, turning me to face him and see the fury mixed with a strange darkness I've never seen before.

My gaze lands on his muscled chest, and my breath freezes in my lungs. He's still covered in chunks of flesh and blood. Reaper must sense my panic because he backs away and looks down at his chest.

With a muttered curse, he meets my eyes, then grips my dress and pulls it open. Buttons fly off, dropping with little tinking sounds to the tile floor. Reaper pulls it over my head, then grips my arms like he's about to shake me as his focus drops to between my thighs.

Another grating sound leaves him as he hisses, "You said he didn't."

"He didn't," I say, realizing that I am wearing no underwear. "I wasn't wearing any panties."

His grip tightens on my shoulders, and then he does shake me. "You were walking around with no underwear?"

"I didn't have time to put any on before Fallon wanted to see me."

“You’re in a house with over a dozen men!” he screams. “You’re to wear underwear at all times.”

I slap his hands away. “Panties don’t stop *rapists*,” I yell back. “Besides, I should be able to walk around the house naked and no one touches me!”

He grips my cheeks with one hand, forcing me to look up at him, eyes flashing dangerously. “Then I’d have to remove all their eyes.”

I jerk free, and he backs away, his hand landing on the top of his masked head. Rage pours out of him, chaotic and nightmarish. The possessive gleam in his eye tells me he would in fact remove eyes if anyone saw me naked.

“No one fucking touches you,” he grates, then grips the material of his mask. For a minute I think he’s going to rip it off, but he lets out a growling rumble and his hand slams against the light switch and we’re thrust into darkness.

For a heartbeat, neither of us moves. Reaper’s just a massive silhouette outlined by a dark blue glow from the sparse lighting filtering in through the bedroom window, his huge form barely visible in the darkness. After a minute, I sense more than see him grip the material of his mask at his neck and slowly pull it up, almost like he’s waiting for me to object. When I don’t, he pulls it over his head, and it hits the floor with a soft sound. A second later, he’s moving again, and even in the darkness I can see him rolling his shirt up his torso and pulling it carefully over his head.

Some part of me is aware he’s trying to keep the blood from touching his face, and all of me is aware he’s shirtless and maskless just feet away. I can barely see him, but as my eyes adjust to the darkness, he becomes more than an outline of a huge man. I can make out blue highlighted skin and dark lines over broad shoulders like he’s made of shadows.

When the shirt hits the floor with a soft thud, my body screams with awareness.

“Men are vile,” Reaper says. “I would know. I am one.”

“You’re not vile,” I say, my words breathless. “You’re nothing like that soldier.”

He lets out a soft laugh. “I’m worse, Kitten. The things I want to do to you are shameful.”

I shake my head even though I know he can’t see me. “You’d never try…” The words get caught in my throat, even as I realize how true they

are. He has done some wicked, verging on cruel, things to me, but he's never forced himself on me.

He moves toward me and cups my cheeks. "No, I wouldn't," he whispers. His bare chest hits mine, and my nipples tighten under my bra. "But don't think for a minute that makes me a better man."

I move my eyes up from what little I can see of his neck to his face. He's so tall he towers over me, some dark monster with no features. He's just heat and hot breaths fanning my face. The lingering metallic scent of blood and something earthy and wild. Everything in me wants him closer. *Needs* him closer. He's big, larger than life, and I just watched him mutilate a man, but he's safe.

He'd never hurt me. Just like he's been saying over and over. My mind may be wrecked, but my body is still mine. And every time I've been with him, I've given it freely to him.

Reaper is nothing like what I thought he was. And I'm beginning to see that every interaction I've had with him may have been stained by my assumptions. My feelings of fear and not being in control. Of him having control over me.

Every interaction I've had with him slams into me. I sat on his lap in that club because he put me there. That's what Striker said. But he *put* me there. He let me be in charge of what was going to happen. Every single time I thought he had all the control, but really, I did. Even tied to my bed, if I had told him to stop, he would have.

It's almost like our need to control makes it so that when we have to relinquish some of ours, it's easier to hand it over if the other person has to give up some too. He gave me a glimpse of his passion, his want, but I had to give up a bit of myself to receive it. He ripped my passion from me, but looking back, I think I tore it out of him as well. I've been forced to give away so much of myself to him, but he's given me much more than I realized. Maybe even more than he intended.

It spilled out of him in waves.

And it tore free when he knew I was in danger.

It's like I'm seeing a whole different man. Maybe not a different one, but the whole man. Him. He cares about his brothers. Keeps his promises.

I'm theirs.

But I'm also his.

I lean in, pressing my face to his chest and breathe. Darkness, metal, and firelight fill my lungs. I drag my nose over his smooth flesh, all my senses crashing together. My lips brush against a metal chain clinging to his flesh. He stiffens as I press my cheek to his chest, melting into him, but then his hands slip into my hair as mine land on his hard chest. My fingers curl into his skin, nails biting into his skin. That feral thing in me, the one they created, awakens. Maybe she's been awake this whole time, just waiting, watching.

Seeing him hack that man's hands off sends a shiver through me.

They did it *for* me. So full of rage on my behalf.

"How many people have you killed?" I ask.

"Many," he says. "Enough to ensure god has forever turned his back on me."

"Is that why your name is Reaper?" I ask.

He exhales slowly. "I earned my name before I went to the school."

My heart squeezes, imagining a faceless boy with shiny black hair dragging the shadowy outline of death behind him.

I'm aware of what he is. He killed Manuel, who may not have deserved it, but he knew the type of man my father was. Did he know more? Maybe he did. Or maybe my moral compass has become so skewed I'll forever judge everyone by whether their actions mean they should be sentenced to death.

I killed a man for hurting me. Trying to do worse.

And I don't feel bad because if he'd do that to me, he'd do it to someone else.

Cora's face flashes through my mind.

"Did they deserve it?" I ask. "The people you've killed?"

He doesn't answer right away, and when he does, it's like the words grate out of his throat. "Not all of them. Some I didn't even have to touch to kill. And some were so deserving of life, it killed a piece of me when they died. But killing isn't the worst thing I've done."

"What is?" I ask, moving closer to him.

For a minute he just breathes. His chest moves against mine, his fingers making slow circles in my scalp, holding my body to his, like if he can hold me close enough, soothe me, the horror of what I did, what we did and what that man tried to do, will seep out of me and into him.

"Stolen innocence," he says

“What does that mean?” I ask, aware I’m whispering. I pull back to look up at the dark shadow of his face.

“I’ve taken so much from you,” he says. His grip tightens, and when his forehead drops to mine, I shift closer, dragging my hands along his pecs, faintly aware I’m feeling him, his skin, his heat, *him*, and drag then down to his sides until I reach his hips. “You’re such beautiful brightness. I didn’t know how much I missed light and laughter until I saw you. I crave it. Your spark. And every time I’m near you, I selfishly leech it from you. I worry that one day, I’ll take so much from you that you’ll just be darkness inside, like me.”

My fingertips dig into his hip as I exhale, so shocked at his confession that I’m stunned silent.

He combs his fingers through my hair, running them through the strands over and over, and it’s not until I move even closer, my hard nipples peaked under my bra and brushing along his chest, that I feel his thick cock, trapped behind his zipper.

Heat blooms in my belly, and I press my thighs together. “I like your darkness,” I whisper, my fingers slipping into the waistband of his pants. “Maybe it’s the opposite. Maybe I want to be filled with everything you are.”

His chest expands as he heaves out a breath. It fans my face. Then his lips crash onto mine. I angle my head as he cups my jaw, taking my mouth so hungrily, his tongue delving past my lips and moving against mine with a heated desperation, that a moan escapes me. Pain sears through my busted lip, but I tug him closer, the sudden need to wipe away the lingering sensation of the soldiers’ hands coursing through me.

“Fuck me,” I grate against his mouth. “Take what’s yours.”

A grumbling moan leaves him, and he grips my ass, lifting me. I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck, as he turns. My back hits the wall, and I cling to him as I feel his hand move between us. His belt *clinks* as it comes undone, and I sink my teeth into the skin on his neck, running my tongue over the flesh. I drag my mouth lower, my tongue traveling over the metal links draped around his throat. Salt and smoky sin flood my tongue. I want to drown in it, to consume him. Own him as much as he owns me. Rip through his flesh and uncover the core of him and drink from his darkness.

“Delilah,” he breathes, my name clawing from his throat, raspy and just as desperate as I feel. The head of his dick notches against my entrance and I whimper, my grip on him loosening. “Come on, Kitten. Bite me. Tear me apart. Let me feel how much you want to be mine.”

My teeth sink back into his flesh as he inches into me. The stretch of him makes me cry out, and tears prick my eyes from the intensity of it all. The knowledge that part of me was so close to being stolen.

His fingers dig into my thighs, holding me up as he slowly eases in until he’s fully seated. His lips press mine, and he takes my lower lip in his teeth, biting just a tad too hard as he pulls out, then stills. The metallic blood touches my tongue, and pain slices through my lip as he sucks.

I know it’s coming, but when he slams forward, I cry out as his teeth sink harder into my flesh. He drives in deep, and then he’s moving, fucking me roughly. All I can do is hang on and let him take. Let him give. Because this time, he’s giving me as much as he’s taking.

This is us. Him and me.

He thrusts into me brutally, almost savagely, over and over, and it feels like I’m ripping in half. Like he’s trying to burrow under my skin. Reaper sucks at my lip, driving his tongue into my mouth, the metallic taste of my blood mixing with his fire. It all builds up, a coiling low in my belly, until it feels like when it releases, it might be my undoing. But then my orgasm hits, ripping from me with a scream, and I melt into him, nails digging into his shoulders. His teeth scrape my jaw, then sink into my neck. The bite of pain makes me cry out, but he doesn’t ease up. He sucks at the skin, driving in harder and harder until pain blurs the lines of pleasure, and he grates out a desperate, anguished sound.

Reaper’s movements become sloppy, his fingers gripping my ass tightly as he rocks, then his hot cum floods me. He releases my neck, and his open mouth presses to mine as he moans. Then he stills, breathing heavily against my mouth. With his dick still hard inside me, he tightens his grip and carries me through the door, and across the room, placing me on the bed.

I fall backward, boneless. He keeps our bodies connected, holding himself over me with one arm propped up near my head. He’s just a shadow above me, and I want every dark place inside him, even if it’s full of nightmares.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I whisper. “What you planned? Snyder? Everything?”

His sigh fans my chest. “I didn’t want to overwhelm you. The stakes are too high to fail.”

“I know,” I say, trying to sit up underneath him, but he presses his palm to my chest, keeping me pinned to the bed. “I won’t fail.”

As I say it, I’m certain. There is no room for failure. If I do, everyone I care about could die. If I fail and Rune kills me, or worse, captures me, he will murder everyone, burn that whole place to the ground to seek revenge. Because he would know that they got to me. Turned me. And Rune wouldn’t just kill me, he’ll kill everyone and everything I loved first.

Cora.

Them.

Every single move Reaper has made has been an insidious creeping into my soul. A slow, yet violent taking of my heart. The fierce desire to protect them. The desperate want that constantly lives inside me to be theirs, for them to be mine. To avenge Cora.

Reaper slips out, and his fingers delve between my legs and drive in roughly, moving his cum in deeper. “This is ours.”

I tilt my hips, opening for him. “Yes.”

“No one hurts what’s ours.”

“No one,” I whisper.

“If they do…”

“We’ll take them to hell screaming.”

A rumbling chuckle leaves him. “Good girl.”

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Chapter 39

Viper

25 Years Ago, June, Age 7

WE'VE BEEN SITTING IN class for hours, doing math and then reading from old books with cracked leather spines, when the bell finally rings and we're dismissed to go out into the yard for a break.

I hate reading aloud because I mess up the words. Father says my accent is improving, but that I need to be conscious of how fast I talk, to slow down, so I enunciate the words clearly, and don't say the words wrong.

It's hard to change the way you do things when you've been doing them your whole life. And I'm only seven. The other boys in the school, the ones older than me struggle more, but Fallon seems to focus on me the most. Reaper and Hunter too.

At first, it made me feel special. Until I noticed the other boys didn't like it too much.

My brothers. They don’t feel like brothers. None of them do. They feel like classmates who give me strange looks when we stand in formation, right before we run laps in the yard. Like how the other boys at Saint Theresa stared at me. Like I was odd.

I don’t think I’m weird-looking. Though Headmistress Isla always said I had a nice boy’s face that deceived people into thinking I was a good boy, when really I was foul and dark inside. Maybe that’s why Reaper looks at me so strangely. He can see my soul since he’s named Reaper and must have an in with the devil.

I don’t know if I like Reaper. He’s not talkative. He’s always off to the side watching people, and Hunter will talk for him sometimes, but Reaper doesn’t object when he does, so I guess he doesn’t mind. They seem to have a bond that most people don’t, but then again that’s not surprising, considering.

But I don’t trust him. Hunter either. I don’t trust anyone with black eyes like Headmistress Isla.

“We’re getting a new brother in a few days,” my brother with dark brown hair and large eyes says from next to me. He has yet to be named, although we’ve both been here about a year. Father says I’ll get my name soon. Once he sees my skills.

Funny that I have to wait for a name when I already have one. When I told Father I had a name, he slapped me and said I was never to speak it again.

So I haven’t.

Not out loud, anyway. I whisper it to myself sometimes at night, thinking about my mum, wondering if my real name shows my skills like my new name will.

My soldier name, once Father picks it.

He doesn’t know my skills are dark and gross. Though that never stopped Headmistress from using them. Makes me wonder if he’ll be disappointed, or worse, want to use them too.

“Wonder where he came from,” Brother says, looking at my belt? Zipper? I glance down to make sure it’s closed. “Maybe Cook will like him too.”

I don’t like this Brother that much either. And he’s always around. Looking. He told me he was thirteen-years-old one day when we were in

line for lunch. Not sure why. I didn't care then, and I still don't. His eyes are off, and I don't like how he just looks at me.

It reminds me of Sister Isla. He reminds me of Cook as well, and I don't like Cook too much either, even though he slips me extra bread and sometimes those candies he gets from the village.

"Did you go in there?" Brother asks me. "That room?"

"I heard Father say the new boy was put in there," Seeker says from my other side. "Preparing him for learning."

The Room. My lips tug into a frown, remembering.

"I wonder if he's going to be as pretty as you," Hunter says, poking something sharp into my belly. I grip the end and rip it from his hand, annoyed that he's once again poking fun at me. Hunter isn't very nice sometimes, and it brings out the mean streak I inherited from my father.

I look down at the metal in my hand. It's the shiny letter opener Teacher keeps on his desk. I flip it over and over in my palm, eyeing Hunter. This one looks different from the last one he stole off Teacher's desk. It's long and thin, with a snake coiled around the top, its tail wrapped around the handle.

Hunter holds his hand out for me to give it back, but I shove it in my back pocket and shoot him my middle finger.

"I hope our new brother isn't as ugly as you or Reaper," I say, my accent coming through with each rushed word. "All scarred up with devil eyes."

Hunter laughs, and it's so loud it echoes off the walls of the yard. "You're mean," he says, but he seems to like that I am, which makes me smile.

"Come on," my brother says, motioning for me to follow him. "I want to show you the book I found in Cook's room."

I shoot Hunter a mean look and my middle finger once again, before following Brother into the building. He said this morning that he'd found a secret book in Cook's room and he wanted to show me, but before I could ask why he was in Cook's quarters, the morning bell rang and the hallway crowded with our brothers and then we had to go to class.

When we're inside, we creep down the hall lined with our rooms and move past the east wing, where the library and Father's office are, and into the long dark hall where our oldest brothers sleep. We rarely see them, but hear them training while we're in class. There are only a few of them, three

or four, and there are rumors they'll be leaving for the wilderness soon to complete their training.

We all go there. When we're older, I've been told. Makes me wonder what it is. I picture the green hills, and distant mountains like around Saint Theresa. But maybe it's more like the thin woods hiding the village from the school.

Or maybe it's the other way around.

Maybe we are hidden.

"Come on," my brother says. "We have to hurry before Cook finishes lunch."

Teacher, Cook, and the rest of the staff sleep in the last hall of the block. There's the man that cleans the school we call Janitor and the large, ugly man that tends to the weapons us younger brothers have yet to touch. Only the oldest ones can train with weapons, and Fallon said that Reaper and Hunter and the rest of the older boys will begin weapons training next week.

I can't wait until I do. I like the idea of holding a weapon. Having it close by in case.

"Here," Brother says, stopping in front of a rusted metal door. It looks like the doors along our hall, but instead of a slot that's barely big enough for a tray there's an actual window covered by a dirty, cracked blind. Brother grips the doorknob and twists, and I expect it to be locked, but it turns in his hand, and he shoots me a lopsided grin as he says, "Wait here."

While I wait, I pull out the letter opener, inspecting it closer. I like the thin blade and clean look. How the light gleams on the metal when I tilt it just right. It looks mean even though it's small.

After a few minutes, Brother appears and closes the door, a floppy magazine clutched to his chest. Then he grabs my hand and pulls me forward. We run down the hall and head back the way we came, only stopping when we reach the bathrooms.

My heart does the strange thing that it always does when I enter the room, though I know there's no cleansing tubs, just shower stalls. I eye the magazine as we enter the bathroom, and catch a man's face with blonde hair and words across the top I can't read.

"I thought you said it was a book," I say, pointing to the magazine as he closes the door.

Brother makes a strange face and looks down. “Who cares?” he says. “Cook showed it to me last week.”

I grumble, already bored, and twirl the letter opener, waiting for Brother to show me what’s inside the magazine.

“Look,” he says, whispering as he moves in closer.

I grip the paperknife in a fist and lean in, glancing down at the glossy page with worn edges. When I see the first image, I stumble back, my heart beating in my chest, and I’m back there. Bile and panic and salty sweat fill my mouth. The smell of wax and the pungent odor of incense invade my nose. The sour scent of body odor. Prayers and moans whisper in my ear. Pain, and that other feeling I liked but hated that I liked it because it felt wrong, tingle along my spine.

“—says we can do this too,” Brother is saying, but all I can hear is *her*.

Let me see. I will help you.

Brother nudges my arm. “Do you think it will hurt?”

Yes.

“Just hold still. I’ll cleanse you of the dark matter inside you.”

It’s like when Commander Maxy announces lights out and everything goes dark. When the room is just bluish light streaming in through the windows and dark shadows. My visions too blurry to see because all I can see is the purging room. Shades of blue and flesh and sin.

Feel hands.

Touching.

Touching now.

“We can do it now,” I hear brother say, but I can’t see his face. He’s just a blob of pale skin and dark holes for eyes.

Eyes like hers.

“In secret.”

I feel a hand on my belt, but it’s not mine. Tugging it open. Doing things I don’t want. My fingers curl around the paperknife in my hand. I lift my arm. Grip the handle, right over the snake.

Aim.

Strike.

A scream fills the room, echoing on the walls, crashing into my ears.

“No,” I say, letting go of the metal handle as I take a step back.

Her words flood my thoughts.

Filthy, filthy, sinful boy.

The scream continues, and my focus shifts to Brother before me, my eyes clearing, the past fading. Red smears my vision, but it expands, shifts. Then it's dripping down and searing across his cheeks. He stops screaming and falls to his knees.

The screaming stops.

A crash behind me thunders through the room.

I hear Fallon's question forming, coming out only as half a word, then he's in front of me gripping my shoulders, forcing me to look at him.

"What happened, *syn*?"

I want to tell him his accent is coming through, but think better of it when I see his face. It's all contorted and twisted. He's pretty, the way men shouldn't be. Black hair. Long nose. Eyes like a cold sky. But all that prettiness looks distorted and crumbled now.

"He tried to cleanse me, but I did nothing wrong," I tell Fallon, and his face flattens. Turns hard.

"Explain."

I don't want to explain. So I keep my mouth shut.

"What the fuck?" Cook shouts from behind me. I glance over my shoulder and find him staring down at Brother and the blood pooling on the magazine under his thin shoulders.

Cook's eyes meet mine.

I press my mouth closed tighter.

"Get Maxim," Father says to Cook as he grips my hand. His gaze falls to Brother, and when he sees the magazine, he turns hard, mean-looking. He leans over and grabs the end of the little knife and pulls it from Brother's eye.

Blood gushes and squirts out, like from a ketchup bottle.

Brother doesn't make a sound.

"Tell me why you were in here with him," Father asks, his eyes darting in every direction before landing on my belt. He lets out a garbled sound and swipes the blade clean across his chest, leaving a trail of red. "Did your brother bring you in here?"

I nod, too scared to speak, but know I need to say something so I don't get in more trouble. I point to the magazine. "He said we could do that."

Father's jaw pops, and he glares at Brother, who still hasn't moved.

I think I hurt him really badly.

"He tried…" Father doesn't finish the question, and I'm glad. I don't want to explain that my vision got strange and all I could see was the purging room. "Has someone—" He seems to forget how to speak for a second, then points to the magazine. "Has someone done that to you before?"

I look away, not liking how his eyes have gone from cold and hard to soft. I know when someone is feeling sorry for me. Sister Blair used to look at me that way every time she led me away from the room after my cleansing.

Guess she didn't feel bad enough because she would always lead me back the next week. Maybe she was scared of Headmistress Isla too.

"Yes," I tell him. "The first time it was because I touched the altar and knocked over the saint. Then I had to do a cleansing."

I place my hand on my belt to show him. Father's hand clasps over mine. His eyes move to brother, then to the magazine. Father's shoulders lift as he takes in a deep breath, making the buttons on his vest pull. I think for a minute they may pop off, but he exhales. He glances over at Brother, who still hasn't moved, and my skin grows hot.

"Cleansing?" Father asks. "Who—" He clears his throat. Licks his lips. I've never seen Father so upset before, and it makes me feel all squirmy inside. Like maybe I did something bad. But if I did something bad, he'd be taking me to my room or solitary, not messing up his words.

"Headmistress Isla," I say. "She said I needed it weekly. That my soul was corrupt." I point to the places that were cleansed. Father frowns. Then I say, "I had to cleanse her too."

Father's face goes white. He stands up quickly and grabs my hand, pulling me from the room. I realize Cook is gone, and I forgot to tell Father that's where Brother got the idea, but I figure it's best to keep my mouth shut.

Father leads me to his office, and he shuts the door, sitting me in a chair then crouches before me. His eyes look strange, sort of like a wild animal.

"No one will ever do that to you again," Father says. "I will make sure of it. Sister Isla will never touch another child again."

I'm not sure if I believe him, but I like he said it, anyway. I always worried she cleansed the others, but never asked. I didn't want anyone to

know I had to be cleansed so often. That I was so full of sin.

He holds up the letter opener. “You were smart. Quick to defend yourself.” He glances down at the blade. “Do you like this?”

I point to the snake curled around the handle. “I like that.”

“Do you know what type of snake this is?” he asks, pointing to the metal serpent.

I stare at the handle, then say, “Is it the one who gave Eve that apple?”

He chuckles, placing it in my hand. “It’s a viper. A highly venomous snake. They are fast and mean and will kill anything that threatens them.” He smiles, and my insides grow warm. “Just like you.”

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Chapter 90

Viper

WHAT I REMEMBER MOST about my mother were her eyes. Clear blue and full of life. Everything else, the days before she died, my time at the boys home, I tossed aside, tucking the memories away, so I could move on. Forgetting the bad, pretending they didn't exist, so that every day wasn't a nightmare.

But the ones about her I gripped tightly. It was all I had left of her, of any good things before Headmistress and Fallon. Before Cook.

My mother loved music and singing. Art and dance. She'd drag me into little shops that smelled of dust and leather, showing me trinkets and pretty jewelry she found. She never bought anything. It took me years to realize it was because she traveled a lot. Being a prestigious ballet dancer meant she often performed in different countries and toured various cities for extended periods of time. This I know only because of the old newspaper clippings I found online about the *Ognennyy* Ballet Company. I only remembered the name of the company because it meant fiery, and she always said she was a good fit because of her red hair.

Sometimes I'd travel with her. Mostly, I stayed behind, but those memories are shadowy. I vaguely remember gruff men laughing and giving me sips of drinks that burned my throat. They wore sharply cut suits, and there was always money and guns around. The dancers who didn't travel took care of me, making me food and telling me stories before I fell asleep.

I would watch them train, not understanding what I was seeing, but loved to watch them dance later at night.

Whenever I think of her, a deep ache settles in my bones. I have fragments of her and the shards of memories of my years before Saint Theresa that pop up are few and far between, but usually center on my mother. Her red hair, and blue eyes, and how pretty she looked on the stage. How her favorite saying was, "*Whit's fur ye'll no go past ye*."

I wonder, if she were to see me now, if she knew all the cruel things in life that refused to pass me, if she'd still say that.

I learned early on that sometimes things aren't meant for us, but find us anyway. Yet maybe she was right. If what was meant for me didn't go past me. I just had to endure the path that led me here, so that what was meant for me finally found me.

And they did.

Or rather, we found them.

When she got sick, she went downhill fast. We left the dance company after she told me she needed to return home, and then we lived in a little cottage surrounded by bright green hills. One minute she was Mum, smiling and laughing. Next, I spent days with the old lady who lived next door, and she'd take me to the hospital to see my mother. The last time we did, Mum made me promise I would make my life mean something. That I would love with my whole heart, live fully, grasping every moment with no regrets. Be kind. Be generous.

Five-year-old me would have promised to go to the moon if it meant she would stay. But every promise I made, I failed to keep.

I wonder if she's disappointed in me.

Maybe it's not too late.

I press my nose into Cora's hair, breathing in her scent tangled up with Breaker's. Cedar and sex and that clean, floral scent that is so distinctly her, fills my lungs. It clings to the sheets, to my skin. I twist one of her little curls around my finger, bringing it to my nose, inhaling. She makes a small sound as I press my very hard cock to her ass.

"Leave her," Breaker whispers. "Let her sleep."

My eyes meet his over her wild hair. The corner of his lip curls before breaking into a heart-shattering smile. He doesn't have to say it.

We're in bed with her. She's safe. She's ours.

Pushing the blankets back, I reach across Cora and run my fingertips over his bare arm, tracing the black tribal tattoo up to his shoulder. Goosebumps break out along his arm. Something inside me melts even more, and I think maybe, just maybe, this is what it's supposed to feel like. To accept love and give it back freely.

Bright. Full. So fucking calming.

"Stop looking at me like that," he whispers, tossing the sheets back. His perfect abs flex as he untangles himself from Cora's tiny sleeping form and stands. He grips his hard cock, gaze drifting over the two of us before he turns and walks toward the bathroom. Mine pulses as I watch his toned ass and defined back, and I debate waking her, but instead, slowly ease from the bed, and follow him into the ensuite.

The door clicks shut quietly behind me, and I lean my back against it, watching as he turns the shower on and steps under the spray. He's so perfect. Defined muscles and dark skin. Even his feet are perfect, which is just an odd thought to have, but I don't think there is a single flaw in him. Even the faint scar on his thigh from a bullet grazing him just adds to his appeal. Gives a slightly dangerous edge to his otherworldly beauty.

"I can feel your eyes on me," he says, his face turned up toward the water, one arm propped on the black marble wall. "Stop staring and get over here."

I push off the door and move toward him, my cock so hard that I grip the root as I step up behind him and rest my forehead on his back. He reaches behind him and trails a hand along my side. When his fingers grip my ass, I punch my hips forward, jabbing him in the ass crack with the head of my cock. My dick slips through the water-slicked heat, snatching a hiss from my lungs.

I glide my hands over him, feeling his shoulders, forearms. Letting my hands explore the taper of his waist, then the dimples above his firm ass. Then let them slide up his broad back and around to his chest. This permission to touch him has my heart racing. Maybe I've always had permission, but it felt too sinful. To touch him so freely. To really let myself feel this tenderness, this wanting ache that has lived in me for so long.

Last night we went further than we ever have, letting in emotions beyond the physical act. Right now, all those swirling emotions course through me, vibrant as summer heat. All the things we've never expressed.

All the emotions we kept tightly wrapped up for no reason other than my refusal to explore everything we could be.

I spent so many years trying not to be everything I despised that I never gave myself the chance to see I was different. This love for him isn't vile. I've always had it, and the intensity, and the way it felt, changed as we grew, and there was nothing bad about it. Wanting him doesn't make me like the monsters of my past. Wanting to fuck and kiss and love the boy I protected isn't shameful or something to hide.

He lets me glide my tip along his ass crack again. I press my lips to his back, tasting the metallic water and his salty flesh. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?" he asks as he turns to face me. I'm forced to take a step back, which feels like an absolute sin to have any space at all between us.

So, I close the distance. My cock jabs into his thigh. His hits my stomach. "Let me taste the words on your lips," I say, gripping the back of his neck.

God, the things I want to do to him. They are gloriously beautiful and sinfully filthy.

"What words are those?" he asks, licking water drops from his lips.

"That you're mine," I whisper, pulling his mouth down. Now that I've had his lips, I want them constantly. On my flesh. On my mouth, on my cock. "That we all belong together."

All of them. They are embedded in my memory, my bones. My brothers live in my marrow.

Our girls too.

"How exactly does this work?" Breaker asks, but the last few words come out strangled as I grip his cock.

"Say it," I demand.

He opens his mouth, the first syllable already slipping out when I press my lips to his, tasting the words as they spill from him, earthy and pure, the way truth always tastes.

My grip on him tightens, my firm grasp around his shaft a little too rough, but he groans into my mouth so I tug harder, faster. Breaker's head falls back, lips parting. He's so fucking gorgeous like this. Droplets beading on his long lashes. The morning light gleaming on his wet skin, making the streaks of water shimmer like mercury as they slip in rivers down his body.

He looks so vulnerable in the daylight. So exposed by everything we confessed last night without saying a word.

I lean in and run my tongue along the thick column of his neck. His head drops back down, a shuddering breath slipping out of him.

His teeth nip at my ear. “Let me,” he breathes.

I blink away water, leaning back to meet his crystal-clear eyes. Breaker’s hand wraps around my cock, gently sliding down from root to tip and then up again.

“Let you what?” I’m not sure why I’m whispering. Possibly because this feels surreal, like some dream I’m having, kissing him, feeling his flesh against mine so openly, and I’m scared I’ll wake up if I speak too loudly.

Breaker brushes my hand away, reaches behind him to adjust the shower head so it hits the wall, then lowers himself to one knee.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my voice strangled. I can see what he’s doing, but again, this has to be some dream. Seeing Breaker kneeling for Cora was one thing. Seeing him kneeling before me is every wild fantasy come to life.

He flattens his palm to my abs and then shoves me. My back hits the cold tile wall. His other hand grips his thick shaft and strokes. We both stare at his hand on my stomach as he slides it lower, stopping just above my cock.

I don’t think either of us is breathing. I know I’m not.

“Like this?” he asks, voice sultry, then his thumb hooks under my shaft, dragging along my balls before he grips me tightly in a fist and his lips close over my tip.

His hot tongue skates along my slit. My palm smacks the wall, steadying myself. All the air trapped in my lungs bursts free at the intensity, at the pure, fiery heat of his mouth as he sucks the head of my cock. He sucks harder one more time, then pulls away.

His eyes meet mine. Such an intense light blue, swirling with life and adoration that I don’t know how I ever once thought his eyes looked cold.

He makes a sound in his throat, like pleasure. “I taste you when I eat her pussy. A little salty, dark, but slightly earthy too. Like ocean water.” He runs his tongue along my tip again. My breath shudders out of me. “Fucking heavenly.”

Breaker drags his hand along his hard cock, his other gripping my base tighter as he leans in again, but this time he takes me fully into his

mouth, feeding my cock past his lips slowly, watching my face as he does, and a tremble moves through my thighs. He gags as I hit his throat, but then he adjusts and slips his tongue along the underside of my shaft, swirling it around the tip as he just as slowly slides me back out, sucking on the head before pulling away.

"Like that?" he asks.

"What?" I say, barely able to breathe, much less think. "Are you asking me how to suck dick?"

His pink tongue runs over his bottom lip. "Can't be that hard." That warm tongue laps at my tip, then his lips wrap around me and he sucks me into his mouth hard.

"Fuck," I rasp. My hand flies out to grip the side of his head, another grating sound escaping me at the sheer intensity of his mouth. He takes his time, testing, licking my slit after I pop free each time, then sliding me slowly back into his mouth, dragging his tongue along the underside. When my cock hits his throat again, my hips buck involuntarily.

He chokes, but his eyes turn bright at my reaction, so I do it again. He releases his cock and trails his fingers up my thigh and then grabs my ass. I grip his head with both hands and thrust. He chokes but doesn't stop me, so I do it again, waiting for him to give me a sign to ease up. When he lets me continue, I pick up pace and feel him drive forward so that my cock hits his throat, and even though he gags, he swallows through it.

"*Fu*-ck," I breathe, unable to contain the guttural groan. "You've never done this before?"

My dick pops free of his mouth. "Nope." Then he's sucking me again, swallowing me down his throat, and my head falls back and hits the wall.

"God, do that again," I grind out. "Swallow me, you dirty boy."

His chuckle vibrates all the way up my spine. My dick slips from his lips, just as the fingers gripping my ass move and slide over my back hole.

"I'm going to take you here," he grinds out. "Soon, I'm going to fuck this tight ass while our girls fuck you."

The image sends fire through my veins. My cock throbs at the thought of him taking me there. Of our girls riding me while he fucks me. Something flares inside me. Some fiery thing that verges on meanness. I'm not sure where it comes from, but I slap his cheek like he slapped mine. Breaker stills, our eyes colliding.

I’m pushing him, I know, but fuck, this feels good. Testing him, his boundaries, seeing how far I can go, like he constantly does with me.

Like he is right now.

“I didn’t say stop, naughty boy. Fuck your hand and suck my cock like a good boy,” I order. The corner of his lip quirks, and he feeds my cock back into his mouth but doesn’t move his hand. I let out a moan that barely sounds human as he sucks. “That’s it. Now, fuck your hand like you’d fuck my face.”

Like he can’t help but be in charge, he ignores my command, and grips my ass tighter, letting his finger press into my hole. But with his other hand, he releases my cock and strokes himself harder than before. Faster. I keep one hand on his head, guiding his movements as I slowly fuck his mouth, and my other hand slips around and encloses over the one gripping my ass. He keeps his eyes on me as I let him move his finger over my exit again, feeling him push harder and harder until his fingertip slips just barely in.

“Fuck that’s good,” I pant. “You’re a fucking beautiful, filthy boy on your knees, with your cheeks hollowed out, sucking my cock, desperate for my cum.”

I grip the back of his head and ram forward. His nose hits my stomach, and he gags. I let him go, and my cock pops free of his mouth as he chokes. As payback, he drives his finger into my asshole, and my knees give.

He glares up at me. “I should fuck this ass raw right now for that.”

My grin is devilish. “Maybe I should fuck yours.”

He drives his finger in deeper and angles it just right. Pleasure curls up my spine, my balls drawing up tight.

“*Shit*,” I hiss, nearly blacking out from the sensation. My cock throbs, and my grip on his head digs deeper. “If you’re going to do that, then keep sucking.”

“*I* control this,” he grates and sucks me back in.

“Not when you’re on your knees,” I grind out.

Breaker drives his finger in and out as he continues to suck, like he’s done this before. Every sound I make has him stroking himself harder, groaning around my cock. He hungrily sucks and licks, using his tongue under my shaft, matching the rhythm of his finger in my ass.

“You’re fucking perfection,” I grind out, thrusting into his greedy mouth. “God, I love you.”

The words spill out of me unchecked. They seem to ignite something in him. Some primitive desire that has him pumping himself harder. Allowing me to fuck his face as he pumps his hand.

“Come on, greedy boy,” I grate, thrusting wildly, barely able to contain this feeling building inside me. “Suck me harder.”

That coiled-up feeling bursts free suddenly. I hear him choke, feel him swallow, but the world disappears, turning dark but so full of light, I drown in the brilliance of it. My knees buckle. I’m barely aware of anything other than my hands cupping his jaw, his tongue lapping at my slit, lips gently sucking the tip, eating my cum. Of my body sagging against the wall, knees bent, his large hand flat against my abs like he’s holding me upright. How he’s still driving his finger in and out of my back hole.

I open my eyes to find him dragging his hand up and down my shaft, pumping me through my release. My knees give and I drop before him and pull his mouth to me. Hot water sprays over my back. His cock slips over my stomach. He starts pumping his cock, rough and hard, then heat explodes across my stomach and he groans into my mouth.

I trail kisses along his cheek, to his eyes, pulling him closer so our chests smash together, slicking through the water and cum on my stomach. My skin’s on fire, bright and alive. My chest full. My heart nearly bursting.

“Fuck,” he moans, dropping his head to my shoulder. “Was that okay?”

My laugh makes him pull back and look at my face. “Perfect, *mo chridhe*.” I press my lips to his, savoring the heat and sultry feel of him before I say, “Any better and I’d have to put Striker in second place.”

His teeth gnash together, brows knitting, and he shoves me away. My laughter makes his jaw pop as he plants a hand on the wall and stands, but I catch a hint of a smile. “You’re such a dick.”

I grip his waist and use him to help me pull myself up, letting my body drag along his. My teeth graze along his collarbone. “And now you’re a cocksucker.”

***

Once I’m dressed, I head downstairs to the kitchen and am met with a breakfast buffet and a scowling Clyde.

“Morning, sunshine,” I say, smirking like I spent the night fucking his favorite person and just got my dick sucked off by my brother. “Sleep well?”

“Fuck you,” is the response I get.

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.” I grin. “Don’t like the guesthouse? I can get you a new bed since you’re about to be spending a lot of time here.”

God, if looks could kill.

“Someone needs to get laid.” I pop bacon into my mouth, crunching down hard, enjoying his annoyed expression. “It does wonders for the soul.”

He shoves his plate laden with food away. I turn to the two women in the kitchen, scurrying to lay out more food than all of us and the staff combined would ever need.

“Thank you,” I tell them. “Please give us some privacy.”

They both nod and exit the large kitchen through the sliding glass door leading to the veranda overlooking the water.

I fucking love this house. It’s huge, grandiose to the point of perverse. I take a moment to look at the dark wood cabinets and the dark green walls, and I wonder if we should decorate the kitchen back home like this. Knock down a few walls to expand it and fill it with all those shiny appliances so Reaper could cook in one of those fancy kitchens.

“Did I lose you?” Clyde asks.

I drag my eyes to him. “Just reliving the feeling of Cora’s ankles on my shoulders.”

His lips purse at my words, making satisfaction zip down my spine. Clyde has been pretty decent considering we hate each other. I should probably be nicer to him considering.

I load up a small plate and sit next to Clyde at the island. His glare doesn’t leave his face.

“Which part are you pissed about?” I ask. “The fact Cora is now mine, or the fact you’re stuck to her side as her guard dog, which means you’re stuck with me?”

“Neither,” Clyde says. “You’re going to treat her well. With respect. With kindness.”

“With some great dick.”

His teeth grind. “I can’t fucking stand you.”

“Feeling’s mutual,” I say. “Should have killed me when you had the chance.”

“Stupid me and my soft spot for dumb teenagers,” he retorts.

“Dumb?” I ask, brow quirked. “We both know I was not a dumb teenager, and we both know I could have taken you that day.”

That day. The day I barely made it out of those woods alive. I wouldn’t have if it weren’t for Clyde.

“And we both know that’s complete bullshit,” Clyde says. “Just like we know your attempt to keep Cora will not happen.”

“We will keep her,” I say. “Both of them.”

Clyde narrows his eyes and shoves his plate farther away. “All four of you?” he asks, then shakes his head. “Never mind. Don’t answer that.”

“Tell me, old man,” I say. “When did you become such a prude?”

He gives me a withering look.

“Is it the fact that your little Cora was pleasured by not one but two men last night?” God if looks could kill. “Or the fact you know damn well we can take care of her better than you ever did?”

The jab definitely lands as intended. Clyde sits upright, crossing his arms. “I don’t care how many of you she fucks,” Clyde says, eyes darting to the doorway. “It’s her body. Besides,” he relaxes and places his elbows on the counter, “that girl needs an entire fucking army to protect her.”

“Good. We’re on the same page,” Breaker says as he enters the kitchen and grabs a plate, loading it with food. He’s dressed once again as Ben, in linen slacks and a white shirt open at the neck. I greedily drink him in, debating dragging him back to bed just to have his mouth on me again.

“When do you ship the cargo?” Clyde asks us, lowering his voice. “Now that Rune has what he wants, he’ll push to move your initiation along.”

Breaker sets the plate down, and looks my way, his expression hardening. He doesn’t have to say it. We are both worried about how this next part will go. Meeting with Rune. Reaper was smart enough to know he couldn’t be a part of this. There was no way he could, considering. But moments like this, when the reality that we have to come face to face with Rune hits, it all feels impossible.

We’re never going to pull this off.

“We’ll deal with it when the time comes,” Breaker says, reading my expression. “For now, we have to wait until Striker is here and then get through the initiation, then we can—”

“Fuck,” Clyde curses, forcing both of our attention back to him. He holds his phone up so we can both see the screen.

Breaker snatches the phone, glaring down at the screen. “Fuck me,” he groans.

I smirk, nudging his thigh with my knee. “I’ve been trying, but you won’t bottom.”

Shooting me a glare, he hands the phone back to Clyde. “Zane says he’ll be here within the hour,” he tells me, then shoves me off the stool. “Go wake up your future wife.”

I grab a bagel off Breaker’s plate. “Wife.” I say, winking at Clyde. “I like the sound of that.”

“She won’t,” Clyde says. “She’s not going to marry you.”

I lift my chin toward Breaker. “Then she can marry him. It’s just paperwork.”

“Not gonna happen,” Clyde calls after me. “Besides, there won’t be enough time before we leave for the lodge.”

My stomach drops.

He’s right. We don’t have enough time to do much of anything. Especially entertaining silly dreams. Once Delilah sets things in motion, anything could happen. A stray bullet. Bad timing. The piss-poor luck that has plagued me my entire life. One wrong move and none of us might make it out alive.

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Chapter 41

Cora

MY MOTHER ONCE TOLD me, on one of the rare occasions she took an interest in me, that adversity reveals a man's strength, but power reveals his true character. At the time, I didn't understand what she meant. It wasn't until I was older that I grasped the meaning of the words.

As I sit in the solarium at the long, intricately carved dining table, covered with trays of food waiting for Zane to arrive, I think I finally understand what she truly meant. Power corrupts, and a life without adversity creates entitlement. And men in the business of selling secrets and lies, have more power than life has ever tested them for.

My mother played the game the way men do. She lived her entire life that way. Unapologetic. Cruel. Unforgiving. My mother ate men up, absorbed their power, then tossed out their remains.

She did it with everything she touched. It didn't matter who you were. Endgame was her pleasure and whatever fed her ego and her greed. Whether it was using my father in her sex games, fucking Rune's protégé, or betraying her best friend by ordering a hit, she did what she had to do—what she *wanted*—to keep her power.

But I guess all those little tests in life that she never got meant she never saw Rune coming. She truly believed she could get away with murdering his wife. With destroying his family.

And it was all over money.

I glance at Viper sitting at the head of the table, now back in his role as Vince, wondering if money drives the men too. Wondering just how much he knows about my mother.

Does he know it was money that drove her to kill her best friend?

Because money drives everything, including Zane, who walks into the large solarium where the four of us wait, that smarmy smile on his plastic face. Breaker stands just enough to shake his hand, greeting him with that mega-watt smile, but Viper remains seated, barely looking his way, much less taking his outstretched hand. Instead, he grabs an olive and pops it in his mouth.

Zane, rarely ever letting a feather fall out of place, takes the hit in stride. He oozes privilege and money, his usual tailored suit replaced with a short-sleeved polo tucked into khakis. But the power? That's all Viper and Breakers. Zane is too corrupted to be anything but evil dressed up with money to disguise his weakness.

Two of the bodyguards from last night—the one who couldn't keep his hands to himself, Damon, and the one with the blond hair—come into the room behind him and take up a spot near the door.

"Good afternoon," Zane says, eyes moving from my red lipstick to the long, hunter-green halter dress the men provided. "You look—"

"You'll no longer be looking," Viper says, his tone deadly. The large dark wood armchair upholstered with heavy fabric makes him look like a king on a throne. He snatches up another olive, glaring as he gestures for Zane to sit at the table next to Clyde.

Viper's dressed similarly to Zane today, khakis and a tight shirt that hugs every single inch of his body, so there is no hiding the power each muscle holds.

I glance at Breaker at the far end of the table sitting in his own elaborate chair as Zane settles into his seat, wondering how this is about to play out. Today's meeting is casual. Brunch with new business associates who deal in weapons and women. While I feel secure we have Zane fooled, I can't help the nervous tension that settles in my spine, making me rigid.

Zane dips his chin at Viper in understanding, ripping his eyes from me to look around the solarium. Like the rest of the house, it's an exaggeration of wealth. Lush tropical plants reach toward the glass panes, bright sunlight filtering through the leaves, casting everything in a soft glow.

“The house is impressive,” Zane says. “Though I prefer a more modern, less—”

“Let’s drop the bullshit,” Viper says, leaning back in his seat. “The shipment will go out this evening. It will be delivered at the location you provided. I expect your men to be there at the designated time. If my men have to wait, the deal is off.”

Zane leans back in his seat, his features turning hard. It’s obvious he doesn’t like Viper, and the need to impress him has passed. “When will the larger shipment for the lodge arrive?”

“As I stated before, that one takes several weeks,” Viper says. “When we finalized the hotel sale, Ben made sure you understood that it was well over a month out.”

“We have to pass through customs,” Breaker adds with a slight smile and a wink as he snags a cube of cheese from his plate.

Wait. Did he just wink at Zane?

Zane leans forward, picks up his water and takes a sip, gaze slipping from Breaker’s face to his broad chest and the gold chain at his neck. A faint smirk touches his lips.

My stomach drops. I clutch my water glass and bring it to my lips, eyes darting between Breaker and Zane, doing my best to school my features. When I glance at Clyde, checking to see if he sees what I’m seeing, I catch the knitted brows and the way he’s watching Viper.

Like he’s waiting for him to explode.

Breaker leans back in his large chair, propping his elbow on the armrest, and pops the food into his mouth, sucking the tip of his thumb as he eyes Zane.

Is he flirting?

There is no way he’s flirting with Zane.

Viper clears his throat, drawing everyone’s attention. “The number of items in the shipment, and the preferences mean they are being shipped from overseas.”

Zane nods, eyes tracking over to me again. “And she’s aware of the agreement?”

I shift, noting the subtle shift in the air.

“She’s no longer your concern,” Viper says. “If I remember correctly, Rune made me an offer. One I accepted.”

“I’m aware. But it’s also not finalized.” Zane sits upright, shifting to look at Clyde. “And you can attest that Rune will be content when I report back to him?”

Clyde gestures to me. “She looks fine to me.” He stands, pulling his phone from his pocket and tossing it on the table in front of Zane. Forks and glassware *clink*. “Call him. I’ve kept him updated. He knows Vincent accepted.”

I bite my cheek to hide my smirk as Zane glances my way.

Zane shoves Clyde’s phone toward him. “But did she accept?” he asks. “Last time she was asked to marry, she didn’t take to the idea.”

Breaker clears his throat.

My heart stutters.

Rune said he had renegotiated.

He’s making me useful.

I blink in the aftermath of Zane’s words, slowly absorbing them. My gaze slips from Zane across the table to Clyde at his side. My hands fist.

“Ah,” Zane says, glee staining his words. “I see she wasn’t told her duties went beyond spreading her legs as wide as they can go.”

Taking a deep breath, I unfurl my fists, and gently place them on the tabletop. Clyde conveniently left this bit of information out. Sort of like he did when I was promised to Zane. Maybe he knew it would never happen. He’s been feeding Reaper and their father information for years. Did he tell Reaper when he found out about the deal Rune made with Zane? He must have told Reaper, because I’m pretty sure he planned this.

My hand in marriage to Viper. Or rather, Vincent Campbell.

I’m not sure how I feel about that.

Keeping my eyes on Clyde, I reach for my water glass and take a sip. My head spins, unsure how to react. I’d be lying if I said this was the least preferable option. Vincent Campbell checks all the boxes for a woman in my position. The problem is, Vincent isn’t real, and now that I have refused to marry Zane, I can’t accept this without a fight.

And Rune knows it. Is that why he threatened me? When he told me I was to make up for Zane’s refusal to marry me by doing everything he asked? Because he knows I’d fight this just as hard as I did Zane.

If I don’t, he’ll be so paranoid that the men’s entire plan could derail.

Clyde has risked his life to help avenge their brother’s death. The men have worked for years to infiltrate Rune’s inner circle. I’m just a pawn,

and my part to play right now is indignant, mouthy, and disobedient.

Because that's exactly how I'd react.

And Zane knows it too.

The paranoia from last night sweeps through me again, the fear that they are about to get caught nearly crippling, but I clench my jaw, shoving it down as deep as it will go.

"I wasn't aware my loose cunt was so sought after," I say to Clyde. "It appears men will do anything to get a taste." I shove my water glass away, and turn my focus to Viper. "I guess the taste you got last night made you delusional enough to think I'd want to marry you."

Viper bites his bottom lip, which does nothing to hide his grin.

"Cora," Clyde says, the single word a warning.

Zane's soft chuckle sends fire through my brain. "It's your money, not your pussy, that's desired, Cora," he says. "Who's the delusional one again?"

The urge to pick up the heavy crystal water glass and toss it across the table at him nearly owns me, but I gain control of myself. This is the second time Rune has tried to marry me off to further his business ties and get his hands on my money, and this is the second time they—Clyde, the men—have left me in the dark.

The anger that spikes is real. I don't have to pretend that. I shove back from the table as I stand, hard enough that my chair rocks backward. Breaker gives me a warning look that would have had me cowering in terror before. Before I had this man on his knees last night begging to have me. Before I knew he'd sooner chop off his own arm than hurt me, because he's that in love with me.

My heart tumbles, crashing to my stomach. The absolute certainty of his feelings, their feelings, hits me so hard that my head swims.

Fear sears through me at the thought of something happening to them.

To any of them. I grind my teeth, every breath shallow and rushed, tears threatening to break free.

"Go fuck yourself, Zane," I snap, teetering on the edge of sanity.

If Rune catches on, he'll kill them like he killed their brother. The severity of the situation hits me so hard, I nearly double over, but I grind my jaw, and straighten my spine.

My fingers furl into the fabric of my dress, eyes stinging, hating the fear circling inside me like vultures, and turn my focus to Clyde. “Let’s go.”

“Sit down,” Viper says, tone bored. “Now.”

“Guess the deal is off,” Zane says, a little too gleefully. “Rune will be disappointed.”

“The deal still stands,” Viper says. He snaps his fingers, drawing my attention to him. “Sit down.”

“I’m not a fucking dog,” I seethe. *Jesus.* In love with me or not, Vince really is a dick. And Viper plays him a little too well.

Zane stands from the table, tossing his napkin down on his empty plate. “Looks like she doesn’t accept,” he says to Viper before turning to Breaker. “I’m sure that goes for both of you.”

“Sit down,” Viper says again.

“Ms. Jul—” Breaker starts, but I storm away, my body trembling with too many emotions, and his words cut off. I make it all of three steps before Zane’s two bodyguards step in my way. I shove at the asshole with the grabby hands. “Move, Damon.”

Damon smirks, stepping to the side to stop me from walking around him.

“I must have forgotten to mention,” Zane says, sauntering over until he’s next to the guards, his features hard as he glares at me. “I’ve been told to bring you home for a little family meeting.”

I grind my teeth to keep from screaming. From crying. From ripping that fucking smirk off his face. Is he purposely sabotaging this? Guessing how I would react? He must have figured that, like with him, no one would bother to tell me I was expected to marry.

That I would be furious.

I *am* furious, but not for the reasons he thinks.

I’m too terrified to think straight. Too scared they are about to get caught if I don’t act as expected.

“Your *Papa* wants to talk,” Zane says. His wink makes me flinch. “Your daddy isn’t going to be pleased you’re being difficult.”

“Fuck you,” I spit out, rage boiling in my gut. Zane did this on purpose, knowing Rune will be furious with me.

Damon’s fingers curl around my upper arm. “Let’s go,” he says, yanking me roughly toward the door. My heel slips and I stumble, nearly falling over, but he grips my arm tighter, jerking me upright.

“Hands. *Off*.”

The sinister edge of the words makes Damon freeze.

Behind me, I feel him move before the sound of the chair skidding backward touches my ears. Electricity fizzes up my spine from the intensity of his rage, making the hair on my arms rise. Breaker’s quiet, “Don’t,” barely registers as I turn to face the table.

When our eyes meet, I see the shift in him. Viper almost seems to change form, something dark and deadly rising under his skin, shifting his boyish face into a mask of cruelty.

“Seems you forgot,” Viper says, leaning forward, placing his palms on either side of his white plate. Every movement is calculated, all the way down to his breathing. Precise. Controlled. But coiled up tightly, ready to spring loose and poison everything within his reach. “No one touches what is mine.”

Every single syllable pulses like a heartbeat in my ears. My stomach dips as Viper reaches for the silverware on the table. Metal glints as he picks it up. I already know what he’s going to do before he does it. Instead of saying, *No, don’t*, my mouth goes dry and the words get caught in my throat.

With a quick flick of his wrist, the knife flies, somehow almost too fast to see, but also in slow motion. Or maybe it’s the aftermath that seems to slow down time.

I don’t hear the whip of it moving through the air, don’t hear as it embeds itself in soft tissue. What I hear comes too late. It’s the soft gasp of shock followed by the slight gurgle as the guard exhales a shaky breath.

Warmth hits my face. The guard’s hand falls from my arm. I take a step back, turning to face Damon.

His hand flies to his neck, his features frozen, brows slightly knitted, almost as if confused. Blood gushes in a dramatic spray outward, staining his suit, splashing his face. Gushing out and hitting Zane’s bright white shirt. It sprays the table, dotting the white china and silver platters. Landing grotesquely on the stacks of bagels and mixing with the red jellies.

The guard drops to his knees, struggling for air, his fucking *life*, and what feels like seconds, minutes, an eternity later, he falls forward face first onto the stone floor.

“Jesus fuck, come on,” Zane screams, but it sounds like he’s in another dimension.

Viper grips my arm and gently pulls me toward him, locking eyes with Zane. “The deal is done,” he says. “Touch what’s mine again, and I’ll fucking ruin you.”

Zane steps back, his face contorting with anger.

Viper points to the body on the floor. “Get your man to remove this sack of shit. And I expect payment before the cutlery is shipped.”

Zane snaps, pointing to the body on the floor, and the man who missed the knife’s blade and Viper’s fury by inches grabs the dead man by his shoulders and drags him away, a trail of blood streaking across the floor.

“Cora,” Clyde shouts. He snaps his fingers in my face. I pull my eyes up from the wet streak marring the perfect stones to his brown eyes. “We have to go. Rune wants to see you.”

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Chapter 42

Viper

"WHAT THE FUCK IS wrong with you?" The words explode out of Breaker the second the door to my bedroom closes.

"Where should I begin?" I ask. "I think I began spiraling into the void when I was about six?"

Breaker lets out an exasperated sound. "You fucking killed a man. Unprovoked."

"Oh, it was definitely provoked." My skin still buzzes with a wild, nearly frantic energy. Killing always does that. Like some sick high that I always regret. Almost always. That fucker had it coming. I can't lay a damn finger on Zane, not yet, but everyone else around him is expendable. And seeing him flirt with Breaker?

I stalk across the room, stopping at the tall windows overlooking the ocean, crossing my arms and gripping my biceps so I don't punch his stupid face.

What the fuck was Breaker thinking?

Just the memory of Zane's greedy eyes on him makes me want to drive across town and open fire on his fucking house.

"That level of violence was unnecessary," Breaker spits out, gripping my arm and forcing me to face him. My fingers unfurl as I try to regain control, but the urge to maim, kill, fucking *destroy* something doesn't leave. "You thought that killing his guard was the right way to go?"

My pulse throbs so hard in my neck it feels like it may explode at any second. But it's nothing compared to the level of fury emanating from him, popping a vein in his forehead.

I suck in a breath, knowing I need to maintain control so we don't end up in a fistfight. "Need I remind you—"

"In *front* of Cora?" he shouts.

My teeth gnash together. Not my best move, but the fucker had it coming. "The guy was yanking her around."

Breaker's hand lands on his head, and he sinks into the chaise near me. "We have to stay focused, Viper. Follow the plan to a T."

"But it was acceptable for you to fly off the rails and fuck up Zane?" I ask.

Not waiting for one of his smart-ass remarks, I go to the bar and pick up the glass decanter and pour two fingers of whisky. Vodka is my preference, but at this point anything will do.

If I could drown myself in it, I would.

"Killing the staff is not the best way to prove we're worth the risk to Rune," Breaker says, watching me down the drink. "He has to trust us."

"That's *exactly* the way to prove it." I glance at the whisky but decide to leave it. The glass clinks as I set it down on the tray, and turn to face him. "We're trying to get into a hunt, Breaker. To kill people. I just proved that I'm capable of the level of violence Rune craves."

"But not in front of Cora." He locks his fingers behind his head as he stands, like he's trying to keep from grabbing me and strangling me. Exactly what I want to do to him right now. "You just scared the shit out of her. After she found out she's being forced to marry. Again."

"Trust me when I say she can handle it," I tell him, swiping my thumb on the dots of blood staining the front of my shirt. The guard was a bleeder *and* an asshole. Untucking it, I head for the walk-in closet.

"I don't want her to have to handle it," Breaker says, following me.

"Stop treating her like she's fragile," I say, turning to face him. His focus shifts, eyes skimming every inch of my bare chest as I toss the ruined shirt to the floor. Adrenaline courses through me, every cell in my being overly aware of him. Even pissed at me, he can't help but look. The way he eyed Zane flashes through my mind, and another hit of anger courses through me like poison. I snatch a fresh shirt and shove past him. "Cora is anything but weak. She is far stronger than you give her credit for."

“I don’t want her to have to be strong,” Breaker grates, again at my heels. “She doesn’t have to be if we protect her.”

My laugh is bitter. “Protect,” I snarl. “So you’re protecting her by flirting with a psychopath?”

He grips my arm, stopping me before I can move too far away. “Oh, we’re discussing sudden changes in our plans now?” He moves in close, towering over me. “After you killed someone?”

“You flirted with Zane-fucking-Devin,” I say, doing my best to keep my voice even. I fail and yell, “You eye-fucked the man responsible for—”

“I got his attention away from you,” he snaps. He moves in closer, into my space like he does when he’s about to order me to my knees. “He fucking hates you, and that’s going to be a problem.”

“Hate is better than desire.”

“Are you jealous?”

“Jealous? What is wrong with you?” I grate out. “Since when was letting him think you were interested part of the plan?”

He shrugs, unbuttoning his shirt. My eyes fall to his hands.

“He’s a fucking sociopath,” I growl. “Now he’s going to try to—”

“Fuck me?” he asks, a slight taunt staining his tone. “Might even spend tonight thinking about bending me over? Take my ass like—”

“The complete deranged psychopath that he is.” I take a step back, raking my fingers through my hair. “We’re not playing this game, Breaker. It’s too dangerous.”

A soft chuckle escapes him. “This entire mission is dangerous,” he reminds me. “Zane is a weak, sour little man with an addiction problem. He thinks power comes from stealing it.”

“He has power *because* he stole it,” I snap. I may have gone a bit too far with the guard, but Breaker has opened a whole new can of worms we don’t need. He has no idea just how sick Zane is. How depraved he can be.

“Zane likes the chase,” he says. “So I gave him something to chase. A little distraction while you ensure we get into the lodge.”

“We should have talked about this first.” I take a deep breath to calm down. “You can’t just go off the rails. It’s too dangerous.”

Breaker quirks a brow again. “Sorry,” he says sarcastically. “I’ll be sure to call for a vote next time. Maybe we can get the dead guards’ vote too.”

I grind my teeth so hard my jaw twitches. He knows I'm right, even if he's being an ass about it. I made a rash decision, but so did he. Except mine isn't anything that will jeopardize the mission.

I behaved exactly as Vincent is expected to act. Brash. Loud. Violent. If anything, if I'd not acted as I had, it would have made them suspicious. Vince is a temperamental creep, but he, *me*, doesn't tolerate violence or insults toward women. I never have. Even at the wild parties we've attended, if you get a little too rough, I step in and fuck up your night.

"If Zane thinks I'm interested, he'll be motivated to get us close to Rune," Breaker says. "You saw how he was looking at me."

"Yeah, that's the problem."

He chuckles darkly. "I knew you were jealous."

"It's not jealousy," I snap. This idiot. How could he possibly think I'm jealous? Of Zane? The thought of any bad touching Breaker makes me murderous.

"You don't like the thought of someone touching me," he teases.

I give him an exasperated look. "You know that's not what this is."

"You said it. You don't want anyone touching what is yours," Breaker says. He grips my neck, squeezing slightly, and damn it if my cock doesn't respond.

"Zane isn't going to touch what's mine," I say, my voice lowering. All that anger turns to fear as he squeezes my neck again, eyes glimmering, like he's remembering this morning. The thought of Zane's wicked sickness anywhere near Breaker makes my stomach roil. "Because you're not going to fucking provoke him."

His gorgeous mouth quirks as his thumb skims over my pulse. The urge to pull him close, press him to me so I can feel his heat and hardness, has my hands skimming up his chest.

"He won't touch me," Breaker says, his voice dropping too.

My throat thickens. He's so much more than my brother. He's saved me in so many ways. Loved me through so much darkness, even though he didn't know I was nearly drowning in it. Adored me, craved me, so openly, even though it was considered wrong. He gave me something to protect, gave me a reason to keep going during the times I wanted it all to end.

Striker is lust and my safe place.

Reaper protects us. Kills for us. Directs us and keeps us all together.

Breaker is my reason to keep going. The one thing I could protect from all the bad in the world. Because I know what happens when the world gets its teeth in you and no one bothers to keep you safe. It devours a boy whole, leaving him shaking and ruined. Discarded and overused, too broken to ever believe in love.

I did everything in my power to keep my brothers from experiencing that harsh reality, even though it lapped at our heels every moment. Breaker is so good despite the evil around him. So brilliantly beautiful that I hate the part of myself that is grateful I had him, my only pure good thing in life, because it means he endured the same hell as me.

"Sometimes I think I'm going to ruin you," I say. "That all my bad things will spill onto you and you'll never recover from it."

Breaker's grip loosens, and he tips my chin up to look at him. "Is that why you hide from me? Why you keep me at arm's length?"

I let go of his shirt and step back. A knowing expression turns his features soft. I hate it when he looks at me like that. It's too close to pity.

"One day you're going to tell me everything, Viper," he says. "About your mother, where you came from, the boy's home where Father found you, and what happened there." Breaker grips my arm before I can retreat too far away. "And why sometimes you get scared and panic when I touch you."

My breathing hitches, and I shrug his hand off. Fuck. My fingers comb through my hair, and the coiled-up panic he's talking about makes my heart skip. I open my mouth to say something to deflect when my pants vibrate.

Digging into my pocket, I pull out my phone and unlock the screen.

"What's wrong?" Breaker asks, reaching for my phone. He snatches it and reads the message that came through our secure app. His mouth pulls down into a frown. "Fuck."

I grab the phone and reread the text:

REAPER: I need you back here. Now. Both of you.

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Chapter 43

Cora

NUMBNESS CREEPS ALONG MY cheeks. I focus on my hands fisting my green dress. The sunlight flickering through the car windows casts streaks of sodium-colored light on the material, reminding me of the small garden back at the mansion. Where the sun shone so vibrantly some days, it turned the shadows to a soft green. The same garden where Viper confessed he had a name.

The same Viper who just murdered a man.

For *touching* me.

"Fucking nut job," Clyde barks from the seat next to me. He grips the steering wheel and changes lanes so quickly my shoulder hits the passenger door. "Viper can't keep flying off the handle like this."

"He warned him not to touch me," I say, that same numbness slipping out with my words.

"And you…" Clyde makes a sound in his throat, but leaves the words unspoken.

I caused a scene. But Viper nearly broke the deal.

We remain silent for the rest of the drive. It's not until Clyde pulls the car through the gates and stops in front of the house that the cold numbness slips from me. Dread thickens in my stomach, slick and deep. My heart thrashes against my insides.

God knows how Rune is going to react. I was rude, defiant, and got a man killed.

The slam of the driver's door rattles me so hard my body jerks. When my car door swings open and Clyde's hand locks around my arm, I try to rip free of his grasp, but he tugs me from the car and drags me toward the front door.

"Come on, girl," Clyde growls. "Rune wants to talk to you."

"More like yell and threaten me," I mumble as Clyde drags me toward Rune's office.

He stands up from behind his desk as we enter. He's not in his usual suit, but a pair of joggers and a t-shirt dotted with sweat, clings to his chest. Like he'd been working out and hadn't showered yet.

Fear coils in my belly like razor-sharp vines when his gaze locks on me. "Zane contacted me. I hear you almost ruined the deal."

My fear tangles with irritation, creating a toxic mix. Of course, he would blame me. Fucking Zane. He did set me up. I grind my teeth, reeling in my anger, only letting enough slip so Rune doesn't get suspicious.

"You sent me to marry a murderer," I snap.

Clyde clears his throat, then deposits me into the wingback chair. "As you can see, Cora is a little upset that she wasn't made aware of the arrangement. But the deal is still on."

"Good," Rune says and rounds his desk. He stops in front of me, and hooks a finger under my chin and jerks it up, forcing my head back even farther. His touch scalds my skin, wrong and unclean. The faint scent of sweat burns the back of my throat. His blue eyes find mine. "You assured me you would not be difficult."

My blood turns to ice. "I did everything you told me to do."

Rune grips my chin and tilts my head to the left, then to the right. Like he's checking for evidence that I did what he wanted and fucked the man he whored me out to. Or maybe he wants to see if I've been roughed up.

Vincent Campbell is a violent man.

Jesus. Viper. *Viper* is a violent man.

He drops his hand, eyes tracing over my face. "I'll take the fact the deal is still in place as a sign he was pleased?"

"Which one?" I don't realize the meaning behind my question until Rune's jaw hardens. "You said do what they wanted, so I did."

His eye twitches, and Clyde makes a slight coughing sound as he sits in the wingback chair beside me.

“Zane informed me Campbell runs hot,” Rune says. “He advises not to do business with him, though he seems to trust Snyder.”

My heart skitters. Why would Zane be trying to ruin this deal? Why say he trusts Breaker and not Viper? Spite? Probably. I am, after all, blackmailing him. And he was eye-fucking Breaker.

“Runs hot indeed,” Clyde confirms.

“He killed Zane’s security detail,” I say as I cross my arms. “Runs a little hot is an understatement.”

Rune eyes Clyde. “What do you think of him?”

His nonchalant shrug and half-frown say more than any words could. Whatever. Seems okay. But he says, “Campbell has good connections.”

“Because that matters,” I mumble.

Rune puts his hand up to silence me, then returns his attention to Clyde. “Despite the setback, he still wants her?”

Wants her. Like I’m fucking livestock.

God, these men.

“Seems so.” Clyde shifts, propping his ankle on his knee, and flicks a piece of lint off his tie. Like they aren’t discussing me like a broodmare. “He seemed to like her.”

Rune nods, liking Clyde’s response. His focus moves to me, his thumb hooking in the waistband of his gray sweatpants. “What did he say to you?”

The outline of his dick catches my eye, and an oily darkness roils in my belly. Rune has spent so many years hurting me I became sickness and fear. It wasn’t until I felt Delly’s tender touch, her gentle love, until I heard their promises, saw the men’s actions, that I remembered I wasn’t dirty. Last night, I was cherished by two men who are risking their lives to put an end to Rune’s power-hungry reign.

The thought sends warmth through my belly, and I meet Rune’s glare with one of my own. “They didn’t say much. Just things like, ‘Yes, please. Just like that. Do it again.’”

“Cora,” Clyde barks.

Rune’s jaw tightens as he crosses his arms, biceps flexing like he’s trying to keep his rage coiled tightly inside him. “Did he ask you anything? About me?”

“No, *Papa*,” I sneer. “I just did my family duty. Vince was impressed. I’m good with my hands… and mouth… and—”

“Cora,” Clyde snaps. “Answer the questions without being crass.”

“I don’t know how,” I snap back. “Crass men just negotiated a business deal with my cunt.”

Rune takes a step back, stabbing me with a deadly look. “If Campbell ends up refusing you after your rude outburst, then you’ll have to impress Snyder.”

A soft chuckle slips out of me. “Trust me. He’s impressed. They both are.”

“You can’t marry both,” Rune grinds out through clenched teeth.

“Campbell accepted your offer,” Clyde interjects. “He liked her.”

“He better,” Rune says, then points to the door and tells Clyde, “Leave us. I need to speak with her alone.”

My stomach tangles into a hard knot. I bite the inside of my cheek, fighting the tightness squeezing my lungs in a vise. Even knowing Clyde’s going to be right outside the door, being alone with Rune makes fear crawl down my spine.

Clyde glances at his watch. “We have a meeting at four-thirty. I need to get her back to my house to change before we go.”

“I’ll just be a minute,” Rune snaps.

Clyde drags himself from the chair, as if he’s annoyed to be kept waiting. He pats the top of my head before he leaves. Sometimes I forget how long they’ve been friends. How Clyde can get away with a bad attitude. How much weight Clyde’s words carry with Rune.

Maybe that’s what has protected Clyde all these years. Rune trusts him like family. Clyde is family.

More so than me.

When the door closes, Rune leans back on his desk, and everything I discovered in his top drawer the other morning flashes in my mind.

God, was it really just days ago that I found the hunting knife and USB drive? The list of dead lodge members and their families and the tally system? It’s all a few feet away, and the idea makes my stomach churn.

I kept questioning Clyde about the list of past members, but he just said, “People die,” and left it at that, refusing to go into details. So much has happened in the last forty-eight hours, I haven’t thought about it again until now.

Until I’m alone with the man who raped me, punched me, and forced his dick into my mouth all while a deadly knife and a list of dead lodge

members sat feet away.

A thought tickles the back of my brain, like I'm missing something. Something vital.

The men want to kill Rune for a reason. Revenge for their brother, they say, but it has to be more than that. Why go to the extreme of selling a chain of hotels, selling weapons, and joining his lodge, just to kill him?

Breaker said they needed something from the lodge, but what could be so important that they are risking so much to get in there?

Why not take him out right now?

Rune is just a man.

Flesh and bone.

Killable.

They could remove him with a single bullet to the head in the middle of the street, and no one would even know who it was.

Yet they have waited. Planned.

Attacked and infiltrated his life and turned his daughter against him.

"Cora." Rune's voice cracks harsh as a whip. My eyes refocus on his fingers gripping the desk edge, looming over me like a vile monster. "Tell me everything that happened."

My pulse stutters against my throat. "You want details?"

One of his eyebrows inches upward at my tone.

"Let's see," I say, leaning forward, knowing I'm going to pay for this, but I need to redirect him. "First, I got my pussy eaten by—"

The harsh slap snaps my head to the side. A sharp sting radiates from my nose to my ear. I grip the armrests, digging my fingers into the material to keep from launching myself at him and raking my nails across his cheeks. Heat bursts beneath my skin. Not just where his palm connected with my cheek, but everywhere, like a match dropped in gasoline.

Even though I knew his hit was coming, the rage it invokes nearly steals my breath. I'm so sick of being slapped around and used.

Viper's face flashes in my mind.

Breaker's.

Striker's.

Reaper's.

Delly's.

Slowly, I sit up straighter, looking back up at the man who's done his best to reduce me to nothing.

“What did Campbell say?” he says calmly. As if he pressed a rewind button and he’s once again Rune, my guardian and second father, and not an abusive, twisted, fucking madman. “Did either man mention the third associate? Steele? When is he returning?”

Striker.

With a deep breath, my fingers uncurl from the armrest, one by one, knowing I need to keep on his good side if I want information. “No, they didn’t mention him,” I say, my voice sweet, lifting the corner of my mouth into a smirk. “We didn’t talk much.”

His chest rises as he takes a breath, his jaw grinding. He hasn’t shaved today, and the salt and pepper stubble on his cheeks makes him look older. When he narrows his eyes, there's an almost reptilian coldness to them. “They said nothing?”

“Like I said—”

He pushes off the desk, and I clamp my mouth shut as he crouches before me, so we’re eye level. That old fear bursts free, penetrating my anger and burning a path through my body, taking over until I’m once again consumed by it.

“Cora.” My name comes out quietly. Strained. His patience is fraying, and one wrong word from me will ensure the meanness he stuffs away will hit me full force. And it won’t be a slap next time. “Campbell accepted my offer. You are to spend time with him. Talk to him. Watch them. *All* of them. Do you understand?”

I will my heart not to thrash in panic. *Does he know? Does he suspect them?* I swallow. “You want me to spy?”

He tilts his head to the side as if agreeing. “I’ve heard of them for years. Many of our associates do business with them, but *I* don’t know them.”

“Yet you’re forcing me to marry one,” I say, but the words barely leave my lips before Rune’s hand is around my throat, yanking me from the chair and dragging me to my feet as he stands. My chest slams against his, the air punched from my lungs.

“You’re wearing on me, girl,” he hisses, his breath hot against my face. “This deal hangs by a thread. Campbell accepted my offer, but I can end it, and ruin him with a single word. Just. Like. You.”

My pulse hammers against his fingertips as I gasp. “Besides their buyers, what exactly am I watching for?”

Rune’s grip loosens, satisfaction darkening his eyes. “Anything. Everything.” His fingers release me but hover around my throat. “No more outbursts, Cora. We both know what happens when you anger me.”

I nod, biting back the rage. Every time I stand up to him, he knocks me down to my place.

“You still breathe because of me, sweet girl,” he whispers, stroking the skin along my collarbone. A finger drags lower, toward the low neckline of my dress. He tugs it, eyes trailing over me, landing on the space between my breasts. “We do what we must in order to protect this family.”

Like fuck the man who adopted me? My mind screams, and I grind my teeth. I’m not family. I’m his tool. A soft cunt to sink into. His punching bag. A ticket to more wealth.

But I’ll be his fucking demise.

Rune just doesn’t know it yet.

“I understand, Papa,” I say. “I won’t let you down.”

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Chapter 44

Viper

IT'S DUSK BY THE time we turn onto the long road that leads to the estate. Reaper sent the message less than five hours ago, and we drove nonstop after landing at a nearby airport. It took longer than expected to leave. We had to prepare the company jet to fly us into a small airfield nearby, not only to shorten the drive but to have a flight log of us actually leaving in case Rune looked into it. Then, an email to Zane's office informed him we had to leave to ensure the merchandise was properly shipped, and we'd be in contact soon.

My message to Clyde was simple and to the point. Keep Cora healthy and happy in my absence. Rune made me an offer. I get a wife with good family ties, who is wealthy, owns part of his company, and in return, he gets my loyalty. Once we're connected, if Rune goes down, I and the entire Snyder Group, goes down with him.

Rune sees himself as the king of his domain. I pledge my fealty, marry into his family, and I get all that he has to offer and his protection, but he also gets mine.

As much as I hate leaving, knowing Cora is still within Rune's reach, I have no doubt my outburst will ensure she's left untouched. Vince will fuck up anyone and everyone, including cancel deals, if she's so much as humiliated before it's finalized.

I made that abundantly clear.

I just hope we're not here too long. Reaper's message was risky. He'd never have sent it, much less demanded our return, unless it was important. Hell, it wasn't even a demand, but a need. Reaper needs nothing, so this means something has happened.

We find out the second I pull the SUV down the long drive and spot the black transporter vans and Fallon's sleek black Audi parked out front of the estate. The tires grind over the dirt and gravel as I come to a stop.

"Dammit," I mutter. Father being here means one thing.

He's furious.

"Yeah," Breaker agrees. "Let me deal with this." He opens the car door, then rubs a hand over his face. "Father is mad at me."

"I left too," I remind him. "And I killed Zane's bodyguard."

He winces. "Never mind. You deal with this," he says right before the door shuts.

I turn off the ignition and grip the wheel, building up the nerve to face Father, before trudging up the drive behind Breaker. Dread pools in my gut as I take the steps up to the front door. It's unlocked when I try the handle, the door creaking as I enter the dark foyer. Silence greets me, and my skin crawls. Something ominous hangs in the air, and when I see the two soldiers posted at the top of the stairs leading to Delilah's room, my stomach sinks.

She's been locked away again.

My boots echo as I move across the foyer. "Find Father," I tell Breaker over my shoulder. Of course he doesn't listen and follows me upstairs. When we reach the two guarding the hallway, they both stiffen.

"Come on, Viper," number 55 says, and reaches for his pistol at his hip. "I didn't even know what he planned."

I point to his gun. "I don't advise doing that."

"Listen, we don't want problems," 55 says, glancing at 48 by his side. He doesn't drop his hand from the grip of his gun. "She's ordered to stay in her room. And trust me, we're not going within ten feet of her room *or* her."

I grit my teeth, inhaling patience as I take in his words, noting they are positioned at the entrance to the hall and nowhere near her door. "Let me deal with Fallon later—"

"It's not Fallon's order," 48 says. "It's Reaper's."

"He chose us to secure her room after…" 55 glances away.

“After what?” I bark out.

“Ask Reaper.”

“Where is he?” Breaker asks.

48 points upwards.

Breaker grips my arm, pulling me away. “Calm down,” he whispers. “Let’s find Reap and get more information before flying off the handle.”

Taking a deep breath, I nod and head up the stairs. If Reaper trusts these two, then so do I. By the time we land on the fourth floor, I’ve gone through a million different scenarios in my head of what happened in my absence. None of them are good. When I reach his bedroom door, I don’t bother knocking.

“What happened?” I ask, barging into his room.

Just inside the doorway, I freeze, taking in his disheveled state sprawled out on his bed. His hair is out of place, hanging over his ears, not combed and slicked back like usual. Shadows paint under his eyes nearly purple, giving him a haunted, desperate look, and I wonder if he’s slept. His black pants rest low on his hips, the dim light of the bedside lamp casting a garish glow on his abdomen, making the deep ink of the tattoos over his chest look harsher than usual, the thorns on the vines snaking up to his neck, seem to sink into his skin as if embedded.

“You look like shit,” I say, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed. Breaker moves past me and enters the room, casting me a worried look over his shoulder.

“What happened?” he asks Reaper.

Reaper sits up when he sees us and scrubs his hands over his face. “About fucking time.”

“We got here as fast as we could,” I say.

He swings to a sitting position, placing his bare feet on the floor. Adjusting the thin chain with the cross around his neck, he scans both of us as if checking for wounds. He brings the gold cross to his lips, absently tracing the scars, then drops it and rubs his hands over his face.

I hate seeing him like this. Such a wreck and out of sorts. Not that I’m surprised. We’ve been watching him unravel for weeks, the seams of his control fraying and popping loose one by one as each day passed. If he’d just admit what he craves is also his ruin, maybe he could begin to figure out a way to keep her.

Maybe we all can.

“What happened and why are Father’s soldiers outside Delilah’s room?” Breaker asks.

“57,” he grates.

“The man is an asshole,” I say. “What’s the problem?”

He lets out a humorless chuckle. “He is no longer a problem.” His dark eyes meet mine. “Fallon is down a soldier.”

My brows knit as I search his face. “As in…”

“The fucker is dead.”

Fuck.

Breaker mutters something unintelligible, his finger tapping his thigh.

“What did he do?” I ask.

“Tried to touch what wasn’t his.”

I drag my hand over my mouth, keeping my eyes locked on Reaper’s, worry lining my next word. “Tried?”

He gives a slight nod. “He attacked her in the garden last night. Strike and I were making rounds when we heard her scream. By the time we reached her, she’d stabbed him. Before he could…” His voice trails off and he looks away, his jaw popping. He rakes his fingers through his hair and releases a slow, steady breath. Onyx eyes move back to us. “How’s my Baby Girl?”

My heart almost collapses.

His girl.

Does he even realize how much he gives away every time he opens his mouth? Maybe that’s why he rarely talks. Truth just pours in rivers from him when he does.

“She’s fine,” I say, daring a look at Breaker. When our eyes connect, his lips pull down, and then he looks at his feet.

That’s right. Keep your mouth shut.

If Reaper found out Rune attacked Cora, it would kill him. He’s manipulated this entire mission, and so far everything has worked in his favor. Everything except that.

Reaper studies my face, then glances at Breaker, looking for a reaction. “Fine?”

“On track to marry Vincent Campbell,” I say. “Just as you planned.”

Reaper’s perfect black brow quirks. “You?” He makes a sound in his throat. “*That* I didn’t predict. I thought it would be you, Breaker.”

“Maybe you should stop playing God and—” I start but Reaper waves my words away.

“Change into your uniforms,” he tells us, pushing off his bed and heading toward the dresser. He removes a shirt from a drawer and pulls it over his head, running his fingers through his sleek black hair. “We need to have a chat with Father.”

***

We find him in the large study of the west wing, sitting at the old wooden desk with his laptop. Striker sits on the worn settee nearby, his focus on the window overlooking the front of the estate, watching a handful of soldiers loading boxes into one of the transport vans.

The second we enter the room, Striker’s gaze snaps to me. Anger furrows his brows, and damn him if his irritation doesn’t make him look sexy as fuck. When Breaker enters, he sits back in his seat, looking him up and down, like he’s checking to make sure he’s safe.

Or appreciating the view.

I’m not the only one who looks.

We're all in uniform, and I note that Striker has his knife at his belt just like Breaker and me. When Reaper stomps into the room behind me, then sinks onto the small sofa next to Striker, I note his knife too. I also note Father doesn’t bother looking up from his laptop as we all wait for him to speak, but a hint of a smug smile touches the corner of his mouth.

“Look who’s decided to join us,” he says, finally. “How kind of my sons to visit me.” He leans back in his seat, pinning me with a cold glare. “Did you finalize the details before you left?”

“The large shipment finalized during the original sale is now on the way,” I tell him. “Rune will have them all in time for the hunt.”

“Good. And the second set of weapons?”

“Being sent to the drop-off location,” I say, unease curling around my ribs. I have no idea what occurred in our absence, but the fact Father isn’t touching on the subject of Reaper killing one of his soldiers makes me uneasy.

“The girl—”

“Delilah,” Breaker cuts in.

Fallon waves his hand, brushing away Breaker's words. "I forget you all have feelings for her." Another smirk plays on his lips as he stands and rounds the desk, eyeing Reaper, who's sprawled out in that arrogant way that makes him both so appealing and so punchable. "Why you four are so enamored with her, I'll never understand. Frankly, it's disturbing."

"As is everything about you," Reaper says, glaring at our father. "Care to explain why Delilah was wandering around the garden last night? Alone?"

My brow quirks, surprised by Reaper's tone.

Father lifts his shoulder. "She has proven she's trustworthy. I felt she deserved her freedom."

A dark chuckle slips from Reaper. "Freedom. We stole that from her the second we entered her life."

Fallon taps the top of the desk like he's weighing his next words. He props his ass against it, looking at each of us. Right now he's Father and I have a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that whatever has occurred this past week, not only may be my fault, but directly tied to the fact we've all caught feelings for the two women we stole from Rune.

"The girl, excuse me, Delilah, needs to be prepared for her return," Fallon says, scanning each of us. "Last night I informed her of the full plan." Striker's muttered curse earns him a dark glare. "My test proved she can handle herself if she's attacked—"

Reaper barely moves, but the quiet shift, the slow way he leans forward, feels like an explosion of movement, it's so filled with rage. "What the fuck do you mean?"

Fallon doesn't flinch at his deadly tone. "She needed to be tested. Delilah has proved she can defend herself and—"

Reaper flies forward. When he stops inches from Father, his face twisting in rage, and grips the lapel of Father's jacket, dragging him closer. "You sent him to rape her?"

My stomach bottoms out. I take a step back, hit with the realization. "You…" Betrayal twists my gut. Acidic and angry, screaming through me.

"You sent him to hurt her?" Breaker says, his voice full of disbelief.

"Of course not," Fallon spits out, disgust marring each word. Reaper's growl makes a cruel smile twist Father's features. "Remove your hands from me, my *syn*."

Reaper drops his hand, yet he doesn't back away. I think we're all so shocked, none of us moves.

"She needed to be tested. To see if she can handle herself," Father says to him. "You've been too gentle with her. The girl needs to be a little scared."

"Testing and raping are two very different things," Striker says, his voice low, full of shock.

"*Test*," Father snarls the word, like he's trying to convince us. "I wouldn't send a soldier to harm her."

"This time," I say, anger spiking.

His nostrils flare, but he doesn't respond to my jab. He runs a hand down the buttons of his vest.

"You've gone too far, even for you," Reaper growls. "We had an agreement."

"Now agreements mean something to you?" Father adjusts the collar of his shirt, Reaper's snarl making him shake his head. "Do you really think so little of me, my son? That I would order my soldiers to sexually assault a woman?"

Reaper's laugh is dark. Deadly. "You've been known to go to extremes to get what you want."

"It is unfortunate what happened—"

"Unfortunate?" Striker shouts.

"She needed to be afraid enough to fight for her life," Fallon says. "Now we know she's capable of handling the—"

Striker stands, stalking toward Father. "Enough of your fucking excuses. If you so much as go within ten feet of her, I'm out."

Fallon's smile is vicious. "Honorable of you, my son, but we all know that's a lie."

"Keep your soldiers away from her or I'll dismember every fucking one of them," Reaper growls.

Fallon takes a deep breath, and then, to my surprise, nods. "Very well." He looks at each of us. "With the four of you here, maybe she'll be properly trained before her return. I'll send them away."

"Any chance you'll be seeing yourself back to hell?" Reaper asks. "Your very existence makes me ill."

"As does yours, my son." Fallon rips his focus from Reaper to me. "This mission is too important to fail. Delilah has proven she's loyal,

proven she's capable, and each of you has proven you will do what it takes to ensure this mission succeeds."

Bile burns in my gut. We have. And I hate myself for it.

"The Julian girl is an excellent tool to have on our side. Use it."

I glance at Reaper. Little does Father know, Reaper already has.

"I do not need to remind you I will do anything to end Rune." Fallon looks back at me, like the next few words are for me alone. "If it means scaring her to ensure that she can protect herself long enough to get Reaper into that room and…" He huffs out a breath, and looks at Reaper. "Get her into that lodge, get her into that room, and leave emotions out of this."

Father shoves past Reaper, gathers his laptop, then stalks from the room.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Striker says, raking his fingers through his hair. "Tell me he didn't just say that."

"He did," Reaper and I say at the same time. Our eyes lock. "What do we do?" I ask him. "We can't let him near her."

"This is too far," Breaker says.

We fall silent because it's true.

Reaper exhales slowly, looking at each of us. "We do this. We follow through."

"Are you fucking kidding me, he—" Reaper puts his hand up, cutting off my words.

"We get into his safe, we get—" He clears his throat. "Once we successfully complete the mission, we'll do what we should have done a long time ago."

Striker glances my way, then asks the single question we already know the answer to. "And what is that?"

"We stop taking orders."

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Chapter 95

Viper

HEAT KISSES MY FACE, laps at my arms. I stab at the fire in the hearth with the iron poker, driving it deep into the logs until they crack and split. They flare wildly, almost as violent and hot as the anger simmering under my skin. A fiery rage settled in my bones after our conversation with Father, and I can't seem to rid myself of it. Every muscle in my body coils tight, ready to snap. I pace the study like a caged animal, waiting for him.

Striker checked on our girl after our talk with Father and said she was sleeping. As much as I want to wake her, see her face, I know she needs rest. She deserves peace after the hell she's been through.

Fucking *test*.

Fallon is many things, a sociopath, a narcissistic bastard, but one thing he is not is a bald-faced liar. He may leave out details, lie by omission, but I believe him when he says he didn't send his soldier to assault her.

That's not how he works. Threaten to kill Striker? Absolutely. Actually do it?

My stomach twists. I like to think he wouldn't, but he would send a soldier to test Delilah's skills. To see if she can handle herself on her own.

But rape?

Not his style.

Threaten, yes. Demean, of course. Test, scare, and humiliate? That's how he works. But he knows how protective we are of each other. And now,

how protective we are of our girls.

They belong to us, and are one of us now.

If Father killed one of us, we'd burn everything to the ground.

Reaper filled us in on the nightmare of this past week. The brutal training, Fallon's suffocating presence, the harsh weapons lesson Delilah learned. How he wraps threats around our throats like fucking collars.

We tried to negate the damage done to them. We thought if we were softer, showed them we cared in our fucked-up way, we could lessen the harm done to them. As if our pathetic attempts at kindness could erase the damage we caused.

Fucking fools we are. You can't plan something like this and not destroy the very tool you're using. Delilah will never be the same after this. If she lives. If we all live.

When they learn the truth? They'll see exactly what we are, and we'll lose them forever.

They may even lose each other.

My heart aches at the thought.

We're selfish bastards. Arrogant, and cruel too. We willingly went along with Reaper and snatched Cora up, dragging her into this mess simply because we wanted her. We thought we could use them and then discard them when we were done, uncaring of the aftermath.

Even after four years of consuming nothing but information on them, secretly longing to touch them, we still refused to acknowledge the soul-deep ache we felt to own them, and prioritized the mission.

But now they are ours.

And we protect what's ours.

"What do you need, my son?" Father's voice snaps me back into the room.

Not turning to look at him, I replace the poker in the stand, and rest my hand on the mantle, staring down at the flames as he approaches. He stops next to me, and I feel his eyes moving over the side of my face. Part of me expects a lecture on how I broke an order, left telling no one, but he's already made his point by brutalizing Delilah and threatening Striker.

We defy him; he hurts one of us. That is how Fallon has always worked. Harsh punishments ensure no repeat behavior. Yet we still follow him, still want his approval, still crave the sprinkling of affection he hands out now and then, when we least expect it.

Like when a seven-year-old boy needs vengeance.

That's the only thing that helped me survive him. Survive the lashings, solitary, the cruel room to break us down as young boys that left scars etched into Striker's skin. How he beat our loyalty into us, only ever giving a fraction of it in return.

But knowing that Delilah endured the same fear, that she was so scared she stabbed a man, replays in my head over and over. All because Fallon didn't see what lived inside 57.

Just like he had been fucking blind to what was happening right under his roof all those years ago.

"Did you know?" I say, not looking at him.

His sigh scrapes against my nerves. "Clarify, son, my patience is thin."

"Cook."

I sense him tense, sense his entire demeanor shift, becoming colder.

"No." One syllable. Clinical. Dismissive. Like my question doesn't warrant his time or energy.

Or a fucking explanation.

"How?" The word rips from my throat as I face him. "How the fuck did you not know?"

Father's shoulders tense. I wonder if he's remembering the day he found Cook mutilated. The day he realized what kind of monster he'd let live under his roof.

"You never told me," he says, but the icy edge has disappeared from his tone.

My chest constricts so tightly I can barely breathe. I didn't tell him because I couldn't. I was just a scared boy whose only father he'd ever known, constantly doubted him. Told him he was full of sin, just like Headmistress Isla.

I press my fingers to my temple, rubbing at the throbbing ache. "You were constantly questioning me. Lecturing me. Reminding me how disappointing I was for looking at men." My hand grips the mantle, the urge to shake him nearly owning me. "You saw something there, something wrong, yet you blamed me. You never questioned Cook. You questioned me—the damaged boy who had already been perverted."

"I trusted him," Father snaps. "The man had no record, no prior history, and he took an interest in all of you. Your wellbeing, your training.

He—” His jaw works like he’s chewing glass. The same expression I witnessed the day I was named flashes across his face, reminding me that somewhere, deep down, lives the man who might actually give a shit about us. “You never told me.”

“How could I when my brothers were being threatened if I talked?”

Father rears back, blinking, then clears his throat. “If I had known what he was doing, that he was threatening my sons, I would have stopped it.”

“Would you?” My rage suddenly drains, leaving me cold. Empty. “Would you have lectured him like you did me? Or would you have taken care of it like you did before?”

Fallon shoves his hands in his pockets, and rocks back on his heels but remains silent.

“You burned the orphanage down,” I say.

The silence stretches. I can practically see him sorting through his lies, deciding which version I deserve. The one in that small village paper or the actual truth.

Fallon sighs. “It was a difficult order, but they followed through. It was taken care of.”

I shove away from the mantle, raking fingers through my hair hard enough my nails scrape my scalp. The fact Father just admitted it is not nearly as shocking as what he just said.

We grew up hearing the rumors of the other school. Full of pretty girls who used their bodies to lure in their targets, then took them out quietly and efficiently, leaving no trace or evidence behind.

I never believed the rumors.

Until I was older.

Until I remembered.

“You sent the women to do it,” I say. “The girls from the other school.”

He turns away and unbuttons his vest, then loosens his pale blue tie. “I made you a promise when you were a boy, and I kept it. What that woman did to you was immoral, sick. She went to hell for what she did.”

“Fallon Byrns has morals?” I spit the words like venom. “You, Father, live by a strange set of morals.”

“They are what separate me from filth like Rune.” He rips at the button of his collar, yanking it open like it’s choking him. “From those

sisters. From Caroline.”

“Bullshit,” I snarl, voice dropping dangerously low. “You sent 57 to Delilah knowing exactly what he was.”

“I sent my soldier to test her,” Father snaps.

“You sent a predator.” I step closer, invading his space. “How do you always miss it? The most evil ones slip past you. Makes me wonder if your ignorance is deliberate.”

Rage flashes in his eyes. He marches toward me, his pointer finger landing on my chest. “You may want to hold your tongue. Those are dangerous accusations.”

I grind my teeth, everything I want to say caught between my molars. How does he not see them for what they are? Why did he choose to ignore what was right in front of him? How many boys before me did he fail to protect? Did he blame?

How can he say he cares for us and then continue to hurt us?

My fingers twitch, itching to grab him by the throat. Watch his eyes bulge as I choke the lies from his mouth. But I tuck the urge away, knowing the only one who will hurt from my outburst will be the most innocent.

Delilah.

“What if she couldn’t defend herself? What if your fucking soldier had—” I can’t even say it, knowing firsthand what that violation feels like. “You would be responsible for what he did to her.”

His jaw pops as he peels off his vest with mechanical precision, folding it and placing it on the desk. “I’m not responsible for the actions of others. If Delilah had failed to protect herself, it would have proven she needed better training.”

“Jesus,” I mutter and stalk to the door, fighting the rage bubbling inside me. At him. At myself. I don’t know why I bother. He may care for us, even love us in some messed up way, but we all know that love is limited to what we can do for him. And that changes based on what he needs from day to day. Delilah is nothing but a means to an end. Our affection for her gets in his way. Any emotion, any weakness at all, gets in the way.

He tried to carve the heart out of Reaper. Out of all of us.

He failed.

We didn’t break. And now we’re stronger together because we survived him.

We love fiercely despite him.

“Viper.” His voice slices through the air. My hand freezes on the doorknob. “I didn’t know, son.”

My jaw clenches. I turn slowly and catch a flicker of something almost human in his eyes. “You didn’t want to know.”

Father shakes his head, sitting behind the desk. He opens his laptop and taps at the keyboard as if I never spoke.

“Get her prepared,” he orders. “She is strong-willed and defiant, but she has grit.”

Rolling my shoulders, I take a deep breath to center my thoughts. We still have to complete the mission. Get into Rune’s safe. Then we’re done.

I nod. “We’ll make sure she is ready.”

“She’s beautiful. Graceful. An absolutely terrible soldier,” he says. “But, Delilah is also intelligent, cunning, though her will outweighs her skill.” A faint smile touches his lips, making my stomach turn. “Watching her this past week, I regret not taking her when she was young. With the right training, she would have made a lovely ballerina.”

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Chapter 96

Delilah

IT'S BEEN FIFTEEN HOURS since I stabbed and killed 57 in Cora's garden. I've counted every single one as they passed, waiting to see if some part of me is going to change.

Nothing did.

I'm still me.

Just darker, too full of knowledge now.

Striker came to check on me several times throughout the night and this morning, demanding I eat, but exhaustion and some deep need to be alone weighed down every limb, making it impossible to get out of bed. To speak. To do anything other than float in darkness, remembering Reaper's words and his touch. The way he took every piece I surrendered. The way he gave so much of himself. But it all mixed up like some nightmarish dream with the gurgling sounds of a man as he died and the crushing reality that I killed someone. Watched Reaper and Striker hack off his hands.

A faint thudding sound crashes through my room and my thoughts, followed by a loud crack of thunder. My body jolts, and I grip the sheets, bringing them up to my neck as my gaze shifts from the rain-slicked window to my bedroom door. I toss back the sheets and pull a thick wool sweater over my sleep dress as I head for the door. Striker didn't bother locking it when he left. Maybe he figures I'm too rattled to leave the room.

Or maybe he thinks I'll listen.

Seems he forgets who I am.

Carefully, I crack the door open and peer out into the dim hall. Rain pelts at windows lining the hall, obscuring the outside world. Checking left and then right to ensure no one is around, I dart to the stairs and peer over the railing to the foyer.

The front door stands wide open, letting in damp cold winter air. Muffled voices and the distinct slick slide of van doors closing break through the patter of rain.

Are they going somewhere? There is no way they would leave me here alone. Not after what happened.

My bare foot hits the first step, my hand slipping down the banister as I slowly descend. When I reach the last step, I lean forward, gripping the railing, trying to see into the library and the large sitting room on the other side of the wide foyer, but spot no one. Outside the open door, beyond the fountain, three black vans line the driveway, parked next to the sleek black car.

Someone shouts, but his voice is muffled, so I can't make out the words. An engine turns over, then another, followed by another. The first van lurches forward, then drives toward the muddy road along the jagged cliffs.

My heart skips, and I rush toward the door. Frigid air blasts my face as I come to a stop, resting my hand on the doorframe as the three vehicles file away and disappear from view.

Goosebumps break out over my arms, and a shiver wracks my shoulders as I take a step out onto the porch. Icy cold burns my feet, but I take another step, wrapping my sweater around me tighter. When I reach the stairs leading down to the drive, I stop at the edge. Rain falls in a thin curtain from the roof onto the top step, splashing my toes.

"You're going to catch your death out there, Sweetheart."

His voice, steady and low, slides through the rain's roar and seizes every atom. My mind jumps to Cora. My jaw sets as fear snakes down my spine, then bites at my neck. I whirl around, heart hammering, terrified of what his return means, but the second my eyes land on him, every thought comes to a complete stop.

He stands framed in the doorway, shoulders squared, arms crossed, head cocked to the side, his fanged skull mask dull in the grayish light, but his eyes alive, almost sparkling.

"Viper," I breathe, mist forming around my mouth.

A vicious growl leaves him, and he stalks forward, cupping my face and rubbing a thumb over the cut on my lip, then the faint bruise on my cheek.

“If I could bring him back and fucking kill him again, I would,” he says. His arms drop to his sides, back straightening, reading the panic flickering across my face. “Don’t worry. She’s okay, *mo leannan*. Our little Vixen is safe.”

My body sags with relief. I absentmindedly touch the cut on my lip and gesture behind me. “Where did they go?”

“Away from you.” The absolute rage pouring from him, cracks through the hard steel barrier I’ve constructed around my heart. All the days of strain, the constant nagging fear, the agonizing not knowing, burst free as something inside me cracks open.

I place my hand on my chest, digging my fingers into the skin over my heart, trying to contain it. I didn’t realize how incomplete I felt with him gone. Viper has been my anchor in some of my most vulnerable moments. In the woods, I clung to his hard edges, inhaling his clean scent when they pulled my truth from me. It was he who reminded me they needed my consent before they touched me again. Viper is the one who held me close, made me feel beautiful and desired in my sun-flooded bedroom when I gave myself over to him, letting him have me in the most vulnerable of ways. He armed me with a blade so I wouldn’t feel so helpless.

Reaper and Striker have been my guide through this past week, but I didn’t have Viper and his bold, yet gentle reminder, I was safe.

Viper takes my hand and pulls me back into the house, shutting and locking the door behind us. He tugs me forward, urging me toward the library. I follow, still pressing my palm to my chest like it will hold all the fragments of my heart in place. They keep tugging at it, chiseling it down until I don’t think it belongs to me anymore.

“She’s okay?” I whisper. “Where is Cora?”

“Safe,” he says again. “No more talking.”

More questions swirl in my head, and just as I’m about to ask if Breaker is okay, if Cora is with him, Viper pulls me into the library, and he’s there.

Right there, feet away, between Striker and Reaper, his perfect, large body in uniform, his beautiful face hidden behind his mask.

“Breaker.” His name leaves me on an exhale, my voice thick.

Viper’s grip on my hand tightens, centering me. A strange tenderness floods the crack in my chest. Something warm and fragile, seeping into my bones. Some part of me wants to run away. Refuse to surrender to this terrible ache taking over.

But I know there’s no more running.

No hiding.

We do belong to them.

They are ours.

They are *mine*.

And I know with every fiber in my being I’ll do what I have to do to keep what’s mine, safe.

Breaker’s brilliant winter eyes drink me in, and I step forward, ready to rush into his arms. Ready to fall apart. To finally let all these pent-up emotions break free when Fallon’s voice cuts through me like shards of ice.

“You’ve wallowed long enough.” Fallon says. “You’re to resume your training today.”

Their father looks different today. The suit is gone, along with his cold, indifferent demeanor. It’s replaced with black slacks and a tight black shirt, much like the men’s, and a burning, almost smoky hate.

Fallon shifts, leaning forward, hands clasped at his back, his cool gaze slipping up my body, taking in my silk sleep dress and wool sweater. How Viper steps a tad closer as his father’s gaze lingers on me.

Fallon misses nothing, and he certainly doesn’t miss how his sons’ body language turns hostile the second he speaks. He knows. While I watched him, he watched us.

And he’s right.

Emotions do control me. I let them win and take over. I will kill to keep what’s mine. To seek revenge. To fucking ruin who dares to hurt the people I love.

Those emotions control his sons too.

And he hates me for it.

I meet Fallon’s glare, my voice steady and hardened with steel. “Then I guess we’d better begin.”

Fallon studies my face for a heartbeat, his jaw working. “You have one more week, Delilah. If you get my sons killed, you’ll pray Rune gets his hands on you before I do.”

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Chapter 47

Viper

2 years ago, July, Age 30

SUMMER RAIN POOLS ON the uneven sidewalk outside the diner. Gasoline, oil, and the random candy wrapper swirl in a shimmering rainbow of city pollution, distorting my reflection. The heat is oppressive today, made worse by the afternoon thunderstorm that moved through on my drive here.

I fucking hate Florida.

The bell rattles and loud laughter spills out from the restaurant as two women step out onto the busy street. I grab the door, holding it open for them, letting them pass before going inside, doing my best to ignore their eyes.

I hate being ogled more than I hate this state.

But we're here on a mission to end Rune, so we tolerate the crowds, the heat, the insufferable, vacuous city so we can monitor him. Figure out a

way to get to him.

The AC blasts across my face as I enter, one of those curtain fans that block the heat and humidity from entering each time the door is opened. Doesn't help. It's nearly as hot and loud in here as it is outside.

I adjust my baseball cap and scan the long metal diner counter lined with stools and patrons, looking for his familiar face. We've only met up a few times over the years, always on the outskirts of town, and today is no exception. It doesn't mean I like it, but I needed to talk to him.

Clyde has answers, and I need answers.

"Sit anywhere," a southern female voice calls out from behind the counter. "Be with you in a second."

Clyde chose this place because of how popular it is. Seems to go against us trying to be discrete, but now I see why. No one is paying attention. No one would recognize him, much less note two men having lunch in a busy diner twenty miles away from where we live. Everyone has their face in a plate or in their phones, barely paying attention to anything around them as I slip into a booth toward the back of the diner and wait.

The bell rings just as I pick up the menu and Clyde walks in. He's changed out of his suit, and wears a baseball hat and a tropical print shirt so vibrant against his dark skin it's practically glowing. As he approaches, I can't help but smile.

"You look like a fucking tourist," I tell him as he slides into the booth across from me. "Where are your sunhat and aviators?"

His dry expression makes my grin widen. In the two years we've been here, I've grown used to him. It doesn't help the memories of that day in those dark woods. The anger. The absolute rage that I feel toward him that he still works for the man who killed my brother, but it's eased some knowing he's at least trying to stop Rune.

Some. Not enough most days.

"Why do you want me here, V?" he asks, picking up the menu and tapping it on the edge of the tabletop.

"V?" I ask, shifting as the waitress approaches.

"What will you two be having?" she asks, one hand on her hip, the other flattened to her cleavage. It's a nice cleavage. Almost as nice as the pretty Vixen I've been watching for two years.

Watching. More like obsessing.

“Strawberry milkshake, the cheeseburger, and fries,” Clyde says. He points to me. “And he’s paying.”

She quirks a brow and then looks at me. “Same,” I tell her and wait until she leaves before saying, “Tell me about my mother.”

Clyde’s usual stoic demeanor slips. He settles back in his seat, eyes locked on mine. “Interesting that you think I know who your mother is.”

I lean sideways and pull the printed page from the back pocket of my jeans. When I unfold it, and spread it out, Clyde’s gaze drops to it and his jaw grinds.

“It’s amazing what a reverse image search can find on the internet.” I tap the page I printed this morning. “You’re much younger here.”

He nods but remains silent.

“What does Rune’s right-hand man have to do with a ballet school in the middle of Russia?” I ask.

Clyde slides the page toward him and stares down at the image of my mother that was printed in a Moscow newspaper several years before I was born. It’s taken me years of digging, but I finally found evidence that my mother wasn’t just a ballerina. She had trained and worked at the other school. The one we whispered about as boys. The same school rumored to train soldiers just like us. All women. All just as deadly.

“Do you remember her name?” I ask, shifting to lean forward in my seat. “I can remember her face. The way she smelled like summer. But I can’t for the life of me remember her name.”

Clyde keeps his eyes on the paper, staring at the image of the two of them center stage, my mother in a silk leotard and slippers, a younger Clyde at her side.

“Catriona,” he says. “She was one of the best.”

I glance around, then lower my voice. “Like us? But daughters?”

His subtle nod confirms it. “Contracted out in pairs or solo. Very skilled. Very fatal.”

“Who ran it?” I ask. “Father?”

Another subtle nod, then, “It shut down when Fallon and Rune cut ties. After Maxim…” he doesn’t finish.

“What does Maxy have to do with the ballerinas?” I ask. I lean back as the waitress approaches and sets down our plates. She tosses straws in front of us, tells us to enjoy, then moves on. Clyde pops a fry into his mouth.

“Maxy dropped us off that day,” I say, looking around. “He sent the three of us out into the wilderness.”

Clyde eyes me, eating another fry.

“I never understood why.”

“Does it matter?”

I huff. “Yes.”

Clyde leans back, looking around the diner. “Maxim betrayed Fallon. He sided with Rune. He was furious after—” His head dips to his plate, then he meets my eyes. “Maxim helped train them.”

“The girls?” I don’t know why I’m whispering. The gravity of everything, maybe. I take a sip of the milkshake and lean back, staring blankly down at my fries.

“The school was hard for the girls. Lonely. Hard on their bodies, their minds,” he says. “When your mother got sick, she begged to go home to Scotland. Finally, at the end, he allowed it. We didn’t know for a long time that she had passed. The second he discovered you’d been placed at Saint Theresa’s, he went to get you.”

My stomach dips, thinking of the day he arrived.

“Did he take me because I was hers?” I ask, the information swirling in my head.

He dips his chin slightly, snatching up the ketchup bottle and squeezing some onto his plate. It squirts wetly and splatters on the table. Clyde drags his napkin over the red dots slowly, like he’s thinking. Or maybe remembering my mother.

“Did you know who I was that day?” I ask, and when he meets my eyes, I know it’s true. “When you saw me in that clearing?”

I wonder if that’s why he let me go. Maybe not the entire reason, but partly. What we saw was so heinous, I think he knew if Rune captured me in those dark woods outside his lodge, what he did to her, to that man tied to the tree, would happen to me.

“You look just like her,” Clyde says. “She was one of our best. Smart. Fast. Mean.”

“She said I looked like my father,” I say, watching for his reaction. When I see the subtle shake of his head, it’s confirmed. “You know who he was?”

“A soldier,” Clyde says, and looks out the diner window. Outside, people move along oblivious to the fact that chaos rains down on me. Life

just continues to go by like I'm not in this small diner, having my world turned upside down. "He was like you, trained at the school."

My chest heaves, air leaving my lungs. "How long has Fallon run the school?"

"The smaller group—the one before you and your brothers—was his first set of soldiers at the new school. He transferred them from one to the other." Clyde fingers the corner of the napkin on the table, seeing things I can only imagine. "Before that, when your mother and father were there, we kept them all housed together. Became an issue after a while." He gestures to me. "Hence, how you came to be."

"They fell in love?" I ask. "My parents? While in that school?"

"If that's what you want to call it." Clyde crosses his arms, looking down at the picture. "Fallon was furious she got knocked up, but your mother was good. Too good to remove, so we kept her."

"And my father?" I ask, "She told me he died."

"On a mission before you were born," Clyde confirms. "Nothing tragic or noble. Just a stray bullet and that was it."

"What was his name?" I ask.

Clyde smiles. "She named you after him."

My chest squeezes.

"Bryce?" I whisper. It's been years since I spoke the name out loud. Fallon refused to call me by my name. Refused to acknowledge I had one other than the name I earned at the school that awful day in a moldy bathroom.

"Wait," I say, realizing he has said *we*. We kept them all housed together. I lean forward, gripping the tabletop. "You said 'we.'"

Clyde looks up, meeting my eyes. "Before I joined Rune in the States. I was the one who trained the girls to kill."

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Chapter 48

Delilah

FALLON'S THREAT ECHOES IN my head all the next day. It settles in my joints, heating my muscles against the chilly morning air, while Striker and I run along the cliffs.

The threat thrums through my fingertips at the range where Breaker and Striker take turns instructing me. It drives me during the afternoon training session with Viper, and continues to propel me through awkward dinners, as I sit between Viper and Breaker, while Reaper feeds me food from the tray as their father watches. The bitter reminder of his threat crashes through my skull every time I spot Fallon, always only a few feet away, watching my every move.

It repeats for the next four days, while I continue training. Even after I take Striker to the floor, finally succeeding after my weeks of trying and failing, the threat rings in my head. It continues during a session at the range, where I hit the center of the target with every single bullet, Fallon's presence serving as a reminder that many lives hang in the balance.

I can't fuck up.

With the constant reminder playing on repeat in my head that the men I care about are at as much risk as me, I throw myself into training.

I'm glad Viper has returned, though why remains a mystery. He is a better, more patient instructor than Reaper and Striker, taking the time to correct me and explain if something I did left me exposed. Breaker is far

more helpful with target practice, encouraging me, showing me how to improve my aim.

None of the men talk much beyond instructing me during practice and a few praises when I do well. The few times Viper or Breaker have escorted me to my room, or down from dinner, I ask about Cora. Reaper told me she managed to break the marriage contract with Zane, but if I try to bring it up, they shake their heads, refusing to discuss the topic. To speak at all.

They stay quiet. Distant. Any communication with me, just a simple order. There are no more sneaky touches. No more dragging me to an empty room to steal intimate moments. It's as if the deadline of my return hangs so heavy, no one can think beyond the mission.

So I stay focused on training from the moment I open my eyes until I fall into bed.

I'm a robot. Sleep, eat, shoot, fight, stab, eat, then repeat.

That's it.

I can't allow my mind time to think.

If I do, I'll feel the cavernous hole in my chest that gapes and bleeds without Cora here.

If I do, I will not make it through this.

Today is no different. But the weight of everything I'm training to do, sits like a boulder on my chest, combined with a restless unease leaving me jittery.

Messy.

I feel messy again today, and it has everything to do with Viper. His strong, sexy body. The way his uniform hugs his thighs and—

"You need to focus, Sweetheart," he says, pointing to my feet. "You're all over the place today."

My eyes meet his. Late afternoon light highlights the stark bluish green of his eyes and adds little glimmers of red along his dark brown eyelashes.

Have I ever noticed the color of his lashes?

"Think of it like a dance," Fallon says from the sidelines. He's been watching Viper train me all afternoon, commenting on my techniques, suggesting certain moves to Viper, who ignores him.

They all seem to have been ignoring him for the last few days, and he's allowed their surly behavior. I'm not sure what happened between

them, but their hostile demeanor towards him is obvious.

And terrifying.

I worry that at any second Fallon will snap and hurt them. So I do everything I'm told, barely saying a word, following every command, and never complaining.

Fallon notices my cooperation, and his hatred of me feels more volatile today. I think Fallon blames me for this shift in them.

"Pay attention, Sweetheart," Viper says. "Do what I say."

Maybe if he'd stop looking like he wants to spread me open and eat me, I could focus.

"Are you saying I'm unaware of things around me?" I ask, too aware of him and only him.

"Yes, Kitten." Reaper's deep voice cuts through the room, and I trip over my feet.

I cast a startled look his way, nearly forgetting he's in the room with us. I need to get a handle on myself.

Reaper's shoulders tense. "You're easily distracted today." He gestures to Viper. "That distraction will get you killed."

I give Reaper a slight nod, and refocus on Viper, noting how he keeps casting looks at Reaper.

Worry slithers through my gut, and I glance out the window, hoping all of Fallon's soldiers haven't returned. Only two remain, 48 and 55, though I rarely see them. I wonder what had happened that he sent most of them away, keeping only two. When I asked, no one answered. But I figured it has to do with 57's attack.

And the fact Reaper and Striker removed his hands.

Ever since that night, the men have treated their father differently. Fallon must feel the shift in his sons'. Feel their defiance in every hostile look, every grumbled response, and blatant refusal to acknowledge his presence.

Maybe he sent them away to keep the peace and kept two just in case.

I roll my shoulders, trying to loosen the tension from my neck, too aware of Viper standing feet away. Of Fallon's assessing gaze. Of the pressure of knowing I have to succeed with my first attempt at premeditated murder.

"Focus." Reaper snaps his fingers at me.

Pain twinges in my jaw as I clench my teeth and glare at him. I'm more than capable of defending myself, yet he's treating me like I'm going to die the second I return to Rune.

He *knows* I can defend myself. The knife in 57's neck proved that. Why he's being so hard on me today is beyond me. Reaper's grown increasingly cold with each passing day. Distant and back to his old self. Mean and nothing like the man who opened up to me just days ago.

Push, pull.

Hot, cold.

He's *infuriating*.

"Have I told you that you're a shitty trainer?" I snap.

"Adjust your tone," Reaper growls back, his already dark eyes turning darker.

My skin grows hot at the authoritative timber icing over his words. Like I'm a child he's correcting. An itchy need to clap back with more rudeness tingles in my throat, but I bite back the words and clamp my mouth shut.

Reaper grips both my shoulders roughly, adjusting my posture, then shakes my shoulders, his jaw working under his mask, his demand grating out of his throat. "Stay relaxed, loose."

I shove him away and step back, his irritation and aggressive manner making my heart race. I'm used to Reaper's moods by now, but he feels darker today. Unsteady in the anger that radiates off him.

"I'm doing my best," I say, keeping my voice calm.

"Your best is going to get you killed," he growls. "I can't have you dying on me."

"That's right," I sneer, losing all control over my mouth. "I'm no good to you dead."

"Exactly." The cruel hiss of the single word slices through my chest, through everything he confessed. "If you die, so do my chances of getting what I want."

I huff out a bitter laugh, my body turning brittle under his ruthless glare. "Of course. I wouldn't want to mistake your needing me with wanting me."

Reaper's shoulders stiffen slightly, but then a slick, slightly acidic and wholly cruel chuckle slips from him. "Want implies desire, Kitten. And the only thing I desire is getting into that lodge."

I hate that my face flames, his words not just knocking me back down to my place as his tool, but searing through me painfully.

He takes another step closer, invading my senses. “If you mistake my desire for you to live for anything other than a deep craving to destroy your father, it will cost you your life.”

His words hit like a physical blow. After everything, how dare he try to rip the one thing I’ve clung to? That they care, that *he* cares. Not just about this mission, but about me. That his cold threat to his father, then his brutal and heart-rending confession in my bathroom, means he cares deeply.

My heart skips a beat, my neck heating. “I can defend myself. Ask 57.”

“He wasn’t driven by blind rage,” Reaper says, his voice growing louder with each word.

“He was driven mad by the need to ram his dick into me.” I jab a finger into his chest, anger making me bold. “And I fucking killed him for it.”

Something ghosts behind his eyes. Regret maybe, but it looks a little too close to fear. Something I recognize. I see it every time I look in the mirror.

“I can and will defend myself. I can and will end Rune.”

Reaper closes the space between us with one large step. “Let’s be very clear, Kitten. Rune destroyed a part of me the day he killed my brother,” he says. “When you pull a gun on him, he will *know*.”

The second the last word slips out, everything slams into me. A kaleidoscope of images and words moving in vibrant color through my mind fast enough to steal my breath.

Rune will *know*.

Not just that I’ve turned against him, but that in order to gain my loyalty, they didn’t just brainwash me; they *took* me.

Stole my body, mind, and heart.

And Rune won’t hesitate to use that information against me.

I nod, lowering my head so I don’t have to see the blackness swirling behind Reaper’s eyes.

So I don’t have to see the absolute terror that I won’t make it out of this alive.

***

“Let’s go over it again.”

Fallon’s demand churns my stomach, and my fingers curl into the fabric of my sweater. I gather it in my clammy hands, trying to control my breathing. Every one of his words lands with a fizzle and pop, eroding my courage. The armor I’ve placed around my heart is now rusted and riddled with holes.

Reaper’s words left me raw.

I glance toward the closed door. Even knowing that all four men stand just outside doesn’t help the unease gathering inside me. That was their condition when Fallon led me to the basement for another round of prepping me for my return. They would only leave him alone with me if they remained nearby.

We’ve been in this small room for hours while Fallon asks the same questions over and over, reminding me to sound genuine. Knowing this is necessary doesn’t help. My nerves spike as each minute passes, and the undercurrent of hatred flowing off Fallon makes my skin prick.

“I’m tired,” I say, focusing back on Fallon’s stern expression across the table. Even cruel, hard, and so full of anger, he’s devastatingly handsome.

“That’s the point.” He readjusts his dark gray vest as he stands. His suit jacket rests on the back of his chair, his shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal his toned, lithe forearms. “You’re weakest when you’re tired. When you’re scared. And Rune will dig until he finds your weakness.” Fallon’s gaze slips to the doorway. “And we all know your weakness, Delilah.”

My eyes drop to the pocket watch tucked into his vest, and an inky darkness shoots through me, remembering the gun pointed at my head. Fallon may need me alive, but he certainly isn’t above hurting me, or scaring the absolute shit out of me to find my weak spots.

But he doesn’t realize my weakness feeds my courage.

My teeth gnash together, that fear now colliding with a bitterness that turns my mouth sour. The hatred he has for me is returned tenfold. I hate him for hurting the men. For scaring me. For sending Cora back. For creating that deep fear that I saw in Reaper.

For putting me in this situation.

He crosses his arms, widening his stance. “Tell me again what happened from the moment they took you.”

I spew the same lines, going over the morning I first woke up.

“You’re lying,” Fallon says, his tone sharp.

My shoulder’s bunch. “I told you everything I know.”

The point of these interrogations is to prepare me to face Rune. Question me as he would. To wear me down. And after hours and hours of being stuck alone with him, Fallon’s whittled me down the same way Rune would. I know because it’s exactly what Rune taught me. A negotiation tactic. As a way to get what I want in a business deal. Push until they agree to my terms.

Fallon’s hand slaps sharply down on the table, making my entire body jolt. “Say it again, but this time make me believe it.”

I repeat everything we’ve rehearsed, adding emotion where he told me to, and once I’m done, I settle back in my seat, brushing my hair over my shoulder. It’s grown in the weeks since I’ve been here.

How long have I been here in this rundown place, facing one nightmare after another? Slowly falling for my kidnappers like a fool. Makes me wonder if that was their plan. Force me to care about them to ensure I’ll follow through with the mission.

But maybe they failed more than they succeeded, because the claim that I’m theirs, feels brutally branded into my flesh.

I wonder if that’s why Fallon hates me so much. Their affection for Cora and me has loosened his hold on them.

“Let’s go over the night at the club.” Fallon clasps his fingers behind his back. Even feet away, he feels too volatile to be this close to me. “Tell me what happened. In detail. Tell me what they said to you.”

“I already did,” I grit out through clenched teeth. I press two fingers to my temple, rubbing at the blooming ache. “Cora and I met them in the club. We spent time with them.”

“Time?”

“Lots of time,” I say, then clear my throat. “Intimate time.”

“With all four of them?”

I bite down on my bottom lip, glancing at the doorway. I have no doubt they can hear this entire conversation, and the thought of fully addressing the fact I fucked his sons while they stand feet away makes my stomach knot.

Fallon’s soft chuckle slips over me, dark and oily. He steps forward. I shrink back, hating that he can see he scares me.

“Did you fuck all of them the night before you were taken?” he asks.

I narrow my eyes. “No.”

“But they touched you in many…” He lets his voice trail off, cocking his head to the side as if choosing the right word. “Intimate ways?”

“I don’t see how this is relevant.”

He shrugs the same way Reaper does. Arrogant and knowing.

“Cora?” he asks.

My brows knit, the weeks of time we spent in bed slamming into me. “I haven’t slept with Cora.”

Fallon’s smirk turns cruel, and I realize I walked right into a trap. “I was asking if Cora slept with all of them when you went into that VIP room. Makes me think you may be having sex with her too.” Icy eyes bore into me, watching my reaction. I hope I give him none. “Did you fuck your adopted sister and let the men watch?”

I wince, but refuse to answer, knowing he’s just trying to get under my skin.

“Isn’t that why they took the Julian girl too?” Fallon asks, glee turning his face hard. “So they could fuck her like the whore she is.”

Anger clogs my throat at his choice of words. “Resorting to name-calling now?”

“Stating the obvious,” he says, rocking back on his heels. “We observed the girl for four years.”

I blink, slumping back into my seat. *Four years*.

Four years of stalking. Watching. Preparing.

My first day here slams into me. They knew our clothing sizes, including bra and underwear. The shampoos and soaps we bathe with. The fucking feminine products we use.

They know every single detail about us.

I brace my hands on the edge of the table. This was planned, I know, but the reality hits brutally, right in the center of my chest. They took me intending to turn me against my father. Was Cora taken because they knew he was abusing her, hoping to use the information to fuel me?

Striker swears they didn’t know the full extent. Only suspected Rune may have been roughing her up. But what if they are lying? About everything?

I saw the pictures. The files linking lodge members to suspicious transactions over the years, but I never saw concrete evidence that Rune was hunting people. I saw images of mutilated bodies. That's it.

In reality, did I ever see my father in the pictures? Did any of those transactions prove what he was doing? Covering up money yes, I helped do that, but covering up receiving money from members for actual hunts? Every transaction was a membership fee for his lodge, or a purchase, or a sale. In reality, he could just be reselling weapons. Weapons he purchased from the men.

I was so traumatized after finding out about Rune abusing Cora, I just believed them. What if showing me those pictures, the supposed evidence linking him to hunts, was a way to implant fear that Rune would do that to Cora? What if it was just a way to manipulate my loyalty and get me to agree to kill Rune? Get them into his safe?

What the fuck do they want from his safe?

"That is a long time to watch someone, is it not?" Fallon's soft tone crashes through the chaos in my head. I meet his eyes. A barren coldness stares back at me. He leans forward, and my anxiety ratchets up a notch. "Do you know why they took you?"

I swallow. "They said something about revenge."

Reaper's warning earlier pulses through my thoughts, swirling with all my doubts until I'm so confused, tears brim my eyes. I brush them away, a skittering sensation crawling under my skin.

"You may have seen pictures of what your father is capable of," Fallon says like he can see each thought flashing through my head. "But you don't know the level of depravity he will sink to if he thinks you've turned on him."

I lick my lips, gathering my thoughts. "He won't find out."

"Let's hope," he says. "Rune is sick, possessive, and paranoid. Remember, he will not think twice about resorting to violence against his own blood if he believes you've been compromised."

"I won't fail." Even I hear the doubt in my voice.

Doubt about everything.

I glance again at the doorway. Was this Fallon's intent? Create a divide between us? Because he sees that shift happening in them? How the men protect me against him?

“My son thinks he’s clever, but I know why Reaper wanted you and the Julian girl.”

My head snaps in his direction. He runs a thumb over his bottom lip, and for a millisecond I’m struck at how it’s shaped exactly like Reaper’s. When the corner quirks, turning cruel, my heart skips.

He leans forward, placing his palms on the small table, making sure I’m looking directly at him. “I think, Delilah Gavin, my sons took you both so they could watch you fuck Cora like the little whores you were in your daddy’s club.”

His words crash into me, and I rear back, not just at the crass words, but at the way his eyes glimmer. Like he’s enjoying being so openly vile.

“Are you going to tell Rune what shameful things you did with his second daughter?” he whispers.

I grind my teeth. “You leave her out of this.”

“Tell me, Delilah, how easily did she spread her legs for you?”

My cheeks flame as my eyes fly to the doorway. Reaper said he controlled the video footage their father saw, but the man owns them. Is Reaper lying? Did he let Fallon watch me with Cora?

Is all of this a lie? So they can use me?

My chest squeezes, my eyes burning. I use the sleeve of my sweater to brush away the tear slipping down my cheek.

“Is what my son said true?” he asks and stands upright, inching in closer to me. He brushes his fingers over my hair as he leans over far enough that his mouth grazes my ear. “Do you have sex with your sister?”

Fallon backs away as my hands fist and I catch that fucking smirk. A pain stabs like a knife in my chest as I stare past Fallon at the closed white door. Why are they letting him say these things? Are they even out there?

“Rune would never talk to me this way,” I say to Fallon. “He would never speak about Cora like this. It would give away what he does to her.”

The second the words slip from my mouth, I cringe back, realizing my mistake.

Fallon raises an eyebrow. “Your father has a relationship with the Julian girl?” He lets out a throaty chuckle. “That’s depraved, even for Rune.” He takes a step toward me, pinning me in place with a dark look. “Does he fuck you too?”

“That’s sick,” I hiss.

“So is fucking your sister.”

“We’re not sisters,” I grate, the bubbling feeling under my skin building in pressure.

“Just as my four remaining sons aren’t truly brothers,” Fallon says. My insides squirm with the way he’s looking at me. Like *I’m* the depraved one. “Seems my sons have corrupted you two girls.”

The door flies open, and Reaper’s large, menacing form barges into the room. “That’s enough,” he grates. “You are done.”

Striker, followed by Viper and Breaker, enters, and the room is suddenly way too small.

Fallon holds up his hand, stopping Reaper before he moves my way. “Let me. You know Rune will do far worse.”

Reaper shakes his head, like he’s clearing the images of what Rune may do to me from his thoughts, and hooks his thumbs in the belt loops of his fatigues, but remains silent. After a heartbeat, he nods, his shoulders slumping.

They aren’t lying. They aren’t lying.

This is a test.

One I’m failing.

“What do you think Rune will do if he finds out about your intimate relationship with Cora?” Fallon asks.

“He’ll use her against me,” I whisper, knowing it’s true. I meet his stony gaze, making sure he can see every ounce of hatred burning through me. “Rune will threaten Cora if he finds out.”

“So is it true, then?” Fallon asks. “You eat her pussy.”

I wince at the blatant and intentionally obscene words. Coming from him, they feel dirty, staining my love for Cora and making it cheap.

“That sickness must be hereditary,” Fallon says. My nails dig into my palms as I envision ripping my knife from my boot and stabbing it through his neck. “It must run in your blood, that perversion.”

“You’re the only perverted thing in this room,” I snap.

“Yet, I’m not the one fucking my sister knowing I’m being recorded.”

Horror eats at my stomach like rats. My breath rushes from my lungs. “I know what you’re doing,” I say slowly, trying to settle my mind. This no longer feels like he’s preparing me to face Rune. This feels personal.

“Do you?” Fallon asks. He glances at Reaper briefly, then back at me, malice darkening the bright, clear color of his eyes. His tone turns sugary and slick. Grotesque. “Tell me, Delilah daughter of Rune, does your little sister taste sweet?”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” I seethe.

A cruel smile curls his lip. “I’ll take that as a yes. You like fucking her. Just like Daddy.”

Even though I know they are designed to rattle me, his words hit their mark. I bolt from the chair so fast it tilts back and clatters to the floor.

“I’m nothing like him!” I scream, hands fisting the hem of my sweater, pulling at the material, trying to stop myself from tearing him apart.

“You used her. Just like your father does.”

“That’s not true,” I snap.

The way a sneer cuts across his face makes the next words hit sharper. Crueler. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, Delilah Gavin. Like father, like daughter.”

I react before I can think, and lunge for him. The sharp sound of flesh meeting flesh slices through the room, Fallon’s head snapping to the side from the impact of my hand hitting his face. I pull my hand away, curling my fingers into my stinging palm as red blooms on his cheek. When Fallon turns his icy eyes back to me, I don’t shrink back. That creature they created, the feral, desperate thing born of lust and grit and anger takes full control, until I’m nothing but unbridled animal rage.

Fallon’s hand drops to his belt.

“Father,” Viper says, attempting to move between us, but Reaper shoves him back.

“I’ll deal with her,” Reaper says. He grips my arm, and all that red molten heat churning in my veins, mixes with exhaustion, with fear and doubt, and detonates.

My vision blurs. The angry cry that rips from my throat is pure, untamed wrath driven by desperation.

To protect. Defend.

To *destroy*.

My fist lands in his gut. He grunts, letting me go.

“Get a handle on her,” Fallon orders.

Reaper grasps my wrists in a brutal grip, but I kick, hitting his shin, and he releases me with a growl. Viper shoots forward and grips the back of my neck.

I spin, hitting his chest with both fists. “Get your fucking hands off me!”

“The girl forgot her place,” Fallon shouts. The slick sound of his belt freeing from the loops slices through the room.

I freeze, hands on Viper’s chest.

“I said I’ll handle this,” Reaper says evenly. “Do not touch her.”

“I suggest you remind her to obey before I do.” Fallon shoots daggers in my direction then stalks from the room.

I heave out a breath, regaining some control, all my focus on Reaper. He rolls his shoulders, keeping my gaze. A few minutes later, the distant sound of the front door slamming echoes through the house. Viper lets me go, and the second his fingers leave my skin, I shove past Reaper and march for the doorway, anger creating a torrent of tears.

Fallon is right.

I cry when I’m angry. Scared.

When my chest might rip apart from betrayal.

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Chapter 49

Delilah

WINTER AIR BLASTS ACROSS my cheeks as I burst through the front door and down the stairs, barely noticing that the space where the black car usually parks is empty. Dirt and gravel scatter as I stalk down the driveway, unable to rein in my emotions.

I know why Fallon did it. Pushed me. Why they allowed it. But it doesn't help lessen the pain. It doesn't help me see past the rage turning my vision blurry. I swipe at my cheeks, gritting my teeth as the tears continue to spill.

I'm nothing like him. I didn't use her to feel safe. For my comfort.

I love her.

I will *kill* for her.

Fallon used every scrap of love I have for them against me. He reminded me that my father is sick and cruel, then took that awful truth and punched it into my lungs.

Exactly what Rune would do.

"Get back here, Kitten," Reaper growls, his tone frayed. Aggressive. His boots thud behind me, keeping up pace but leaving a few feet between us.

"No," I shout over my shoulder. My feet carry me blindly, my body screaming to just get away. Away from the crushing weight of knowing I'll soon face my father.

Lie to him.

Kill him.

Away from the truth that Cora is a knife he'll twist in my heart if he finds out I betrayed him.

"Delilah!" Reaper yells. My name now. No more pet names. No more patience. No more passion and flares of hunger.

Just the raw, bitter truth.

We're all in danger. And it's up to me to keep everyone safe.

"You know what happens when you don't listen," Reaper growls, his voice growing even louder.

Goosebumps rise along my arms, from the subtle threat, lined with a dark and bitter fear. But I refuse to stop. He can beat my ass raw before I stop moving. Before I succumb to the traitorous ache searing through me that just wants this all to stop. For him to hold me like he did the other night. For them to protect me from Rune.

I don't know why I'm so desperate for it now. They never have. They may have controlled the amount of damage caused to my heart, releasing information bit by bit, but they've never protected me from the whole, brutal truth.

"We had to." It's Breaker's calm voice that makes me pause.

I swirl around to face them. They all stop at once, lined up in a perfect row. Reaper and Striker in the center, Breaker and Viper flanking either side. Just like the first time I saw them all.

That night slices through me, doubt poisoning every moment we've shared.

I just need a minute to breathe.

My gaze shifts, focusing on the carriage house, and I take off again. *I just need a minute to think.* Every day has been so consumed by them, I haven't had time to process, or really examine everything from all angles.

"You need to be prepared." Breaker's voice snaps through my thoughts. "Rune will hurt her if he thinks it will break you."

The truth of his words rips a growl from my throat.

Fuck Rune.

Fuck *them*.

"You know it's true," Breaker calls, his voice growing louder the closer he gets.

"Leave me alone," I say, marching forward, ignoring the needling sensation pricking at the back of my neck, telling me Breaker is too close.

They all are.

“We had to prepare you,” he says.

“Get back here, Delilah,” Reaper barks out, his dark tone making my steps falter. His boots thunder behind me, growing closer, and I break into a run.

“I don’t recommend that!” Striker’s shout cracks through the air.

The dark edge in his deep growl twists an odd combination of fear and arousal in my belly. I shoot past the carriage house, breaking into a full sprint, breaths growing heavier, but steady, all that running with Striker pays off as I dart toward the tree line. The targets blur in my periphery as I fix my gaze on the dark woods.

I tear past the tree line, shielding my face from low branches. Thudding boots close in behind me, and a cry builds in my throat. An arm snares my waist, yanking me backward. My scream cuts through the air as we tumble. Just before impact, he twists, his body cushioning mine against the cold, unforgiving earth.

“Caught you, pretty kitty,” Reaper growls in my ear, breaths hot and heavy on my skin.

“Let me go!” I scream, struggling to get free. My elbow lands in his ribs, and I dig in, ramming it back into him harder and harder. Reaper’s grip loosens, a guttural sound slipping out of him as I break free of his grasp and scramble to my hands and knees.

“Restrain her,” he grates.

Before I can stand, one of them snatches my left boot into a tight grip, then my right, and my arms give as they drag me backwards. My face hits the ground, and I cry out.

“Stop,” Viper says, irritation making the word rough. “Hold still before you hurt yourself.”

“Fuck you,” I seethe, my cheek raking across the dirt as I scrabble for purchase, but I’m drug backward further, making it impossible. This feels far more brutal than that night in the woods. I’m fighting harder. I *am* harder. Stronger. The fight in me driven by raw truth.

A huge body slams onto my back, covering me completely, shoving my breath from my lungs as he pins me to the ground.

“Tiny Thing,” Breaker breathes, his massive hands pinning my arms. His warm cheek presses against mine, and I realize he removed his mask. “Stop fighting us.”

Knees hit the dirt near my head. The black fatigues stretch over his thick legs. The tattoos on the back of his fingers stand out harshly as he grips his thighs, like he's trying to keep himself from reaching for me.

"You let him win," Reaper grates. "You allowed him to get under your skin."

"And you let him insult her," I spit out. "You let him—"

"You're not listening, Delilah," Reaper says. His voice is gutted, rougher than it has ever sounded. "You never fucking *listen*."

The urge to scream burns my throat. I have been paying attention. I know what's at stake. I've heard, seen, lived and breathed every cruel second of my demise since I woke up on that worn wood floor.

Bucking, I try to get Breaker off me, but he's so big, so heavy, I can barely move. My pussy throbs in response to his weight, and I swallow a frustrated growl. The way I respond from being pinned down by them again, surrounded by their brute force, sends fire raking across my brain like sharp talons.

These men turned my body against me. Turned my mind against me.

They've ruined my life.

They saved Cora.

That scream finally breaks free, shredding my throat, and I buck once more, weeks of bottled-up agony breaking me open. I'm so fucking angry, more at myself than them. Enraged that I can't trust myself with this desperate need blooming inside that feels like an addiction.

My arm slips free of Breaker's grasp, and I twist, attempting to roll him off, but Reaper clutches my wrists, flattening them to the ground with one large hand. Breaker's weight leaves, and the cold blasts across me. He straddles my thighs, then grips the waistband of my leggings and tugs. Freezing air slaps my heated skin.

"Fuck you," I seethe. "Get off me."

"Fuck me?" Reaper asks. "Or fuck you?"

I press my forehead to the ground, grinding my teeth, and fighting tears, but I fail, and they slip out. My teeth gnash together as I choke back a strangled sob. My nails dig into the dirt, trying to ignore the heat blooming between my thighs, begging for what they refuse to say out loud.

That they care. That they are as ravenous and consumed with the need to own my heart as I am desperate to own theirs.

"Was that little whimper a beg, Sweetheart?" Viper asks.

Dirt sticks to my cheeks as I twist, meeting Viper's eyes. His mask sits slightly askew, the fanged mouth grinning at me cruelly, but as our gazes lock, the same softness I saw days ago turns the turquoise color brighter. Knowing. The fact he knows how badly I constantly want all their roughness and hard edges, reignites the fire in my chest.

"We're trying to keep you from dying at his hands." Viper's focus shifts briefly to Breaker, to Reaper, then Striker, before landing back on me.

"But you're too fucking stubborn to see it," Reaper says, hand tightening on my wrists, as if trying to force his words to sink under my skin. "Everything I've done was to ensure your safety."

"Everything you've done to me is *sick*." I hate how my voice cracks. Hate this pain lacing through me. "Your plan, the mind games. *Fucking* me."

Breaker jerks my pants even lower, exposing my rear and thighs to the winter winds whipping through the trees, stealing my breath. His large palm lands sharply on my rear, hard enough to sting, to shock me, but not enough to hurt.

The fact that Breaker, out of all of them, spanked me, makes my vision blur.

"How long do you think he could have hidden his hunts from you?" Striker snaps. "Because he has been spiraling out of control for years."

My angry growl earns another sharp smack on my ass.

"You're too smart, Delilah," Reaper grates. "He couldn't hide it from you much longer. And then what?"

I shake my head, refusing to answer.

"You have no idea how cruel he is," Reaper says. "Or what he's already done. The choices he's made."

"You made the choice to involve me," I snarl, my lips dragging across the dirt. "You made me a part of this."

"Rune made you a part of this long before you discovered the truth," Reaper says. "He—" His voice cuts off like he's stopping himself from saying more.

"What would he have done if you had found out about the hunts before we prepared you?" Striker asks.

Viper leans over, making sure I'm paying attention. "We know what you would have done. We've watched you long enough. You would have tried to stop him."

“Alone,” Striker adds.

“Then,” Breaker says, “he would have killed you. No hesitation.”

“That’s right. I’m no good to you dead,” I snarl, bucking, but Breaker flattens his palm to my back, and another slap sears across my rear. Fingers weave into my hair, and my head’s yanked back hard enough that pain tinges in my neck.

Reaper’s black eyes bore into me. “You’re going to fucking listen now,” he says. “The purpose of this mission has always been to avenge my brother, neutralize Rune, and ensure the safety of our girls.”

Our girls.

“Liar,” I snap because I can’t stand the awful truth. Deep in my gut, I know what they are saying is true, but waves of doubt tangled with terror wash over me until I’m drowning in it.

“You’re ours.” Reaper’s voice curls around me like smoke, lined with possessiveness. His hand leaves my hair, and he cups my cheek, leaning down. Our gazes collide, and all the darkness that lives in him swirls, like he’s gathering it up, ready to pour it into me. “We told you we’d never let you go. Don’t you ever doubt that again. Never doubt me. You’ve been mine for so long, you’ve never belonged to anyone else.”

Reaper lets me go, and I press my face to the ground. “Just do it, already,” I grate. “Let’s get this over with. Take the belt to me. Punish me.”

Hurt me, so I don’t have to feel this gnawing yearning.

Fuck me. Ruin me.

Love me.

So much that they can’t stand it. So much that they never send me back or put me in harm’s way. Love Cora madly. Free her from Rune and bring her to me. Then we could all protect each other, and no darkness would ever touch us again.

Not Rune. Not Fallon.

Nothing.

A choked sob escapes. Tears spill onto the ground, soaking the dirt and leaves under my cheek, the weeks here flashing through my head, turning everything I thought I knew upside down.

Fallon made me doubt myself. Them. Everything. I finally accepted that this awful ache that grows every time they look at me, every time they touch me, glows too gently to be anything but love. It’s too bright and warm, and I can’t begin to unravel whether it stems from whatever games

they’ve played with my head or if it’s from all the things I’ve learned about them.

I don’t think it matters.

It just is.

But Fallon just ripped it away, and I’m left once again wrapped in fear, hoping for the impossible. That all of this will be worth it.

That they aren’t just manipulating me.

That they are mine.

A palm slides across the back of my neck, warm and steadying. “Princess,” Striker says, voice low. “We’re not hurting you.” His hand squeezes, getting my attention. “Everything you feel right now? He’s going to use every bit against you, and you’ll break.”

But they’ve already broken me.

“Kitten.” Reaper's stern tone slides over me, heating my cold skin. “Eyes on me.”

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Chapter 50

Delilah

FIRE IGNITES IN MY core. Viper lets go of my boot. Striker releases my other foot as Reaper unfurls his fingers from my wrists. Breaker eases me up onto my knees, crushing my back to his chest.

My gaze lands on Reaper, kneeling before me, and my chest cracks. Dusty dirt covers the fabric over his knees. His shirt. Shadows play over his powerful body; the fading light flickering through the canopy, turning him into just a massive shadow. The mask and melting skull hide every emotion and every feature. I have no idea what he looks like. No clue how many tattoos cover his flesh under his clothes.

The only thing I know is the feel of his body against mine. The heat and hardness of him moving into me. The taste of his mouth.

He's confessed in subtle, earth-shattering ways that this dark, tangled up and confusing feeling that stretches between us isn't one-sided. It's lust and fear, and it pulses with a heat that makes me want to combust.

He's everything I shouldn't want but everything I crave.

Reaper's dark eyes burn into me, black as midnight, devouring light, my sanity, and I know deep in my gut this man is my absolute undoing.

The words tear from his throat, rough and gravelly. "Keep looking at me like that, Delilah."

A warning.

A promise.

"Like what?" I breathe.

“Like you want me to ruin you.”

I think he already has.

They all have.

Broken me to pieces, then reshaped all those parts, forcing room in my heart for each man before me.

Breaker’s cheek nuzzles into my hair, his whisper sending sparks of light down my spine. “Give me that mouth.” Then he grips my chin, angling my head toward him. I rip my eyes off Reaper, my gaze colliding with Striker kneeling next to us, as I twist my head to meet Breaker’s warm mouth. Dirt and grit smear across my lips as Breaker’s mouth crashes onto mine, his tongue hungrily moving past my lips. The familiar, safe warmth of being in his arms, rips a whimper from me as the taste of him floods my senses. Spice and earth.

God, how I’ve missed him.

My throat clogs as I slide my hand along his smooth jaw. My entire body melts, my lashes fluttering closed as his palm skims over my chest, down lower until he reaches the space between my legs. He shoves his hand between my thighs, and cups me, his finger skimming my pussy, then dipping into my opening.

“So wet,” he says against my lips. “Fuck, I’ve missed the feel of you. The taste of you.”

A fevered, primal need claws at my insides, sharp with a dark want to possess them. I lean back into his touch, gripping the back of his head, forcing his mouth harder to mine. My hips buck to meet his hand as he slips his finger, slick with my wetness, over my clit.

It’s like the heat scorching through me, sets him on fire. Breaker’s mouth grows hungrier, his touch greedier as I pour every ounce of myself into the kiss, letting him taste and take and have me.

For a heartbeat, I get lost in him, and the others around us fade. It’s just the two of us, the press of my back molded to his hard chest. His hands. His lips. His heat and longing.

Breaker’s gentleness crumbles as he devours my mouth, and he rips my legging to my knees. A whimper escapes when the seams pop, the sharp sting of material digging into my skin. The shock of it sends another wave of hunger through me, the heat at my center pulsing brighter. I arch into him, pressing my ass against the hard bulge in his pants. His touch turns

rougher, his free hand snaking around my neck, gripping so tightly, pressure builds in my head.

He pulls away, breaking the kiss, and his fingers unravel from my throat. I suck in air, dizzy with desire. Breaths heave from his lungs, and an animalistic growl rips from his throat as he grips my hair, shoving me forward. My hands land in the dirt. My eyes lock with Reaper's. The clank of metal from behind me cuts through the woods, sending molten heat between my legs.

"Come here." Breaker grips my hip, dragging me backward. My palms rake over the dirt and twigs. Some animal thing in me, scraping at my bones, as the heat of his cock slips along my opening. "Fuck, Tiny Thing, your pussy is throbbing and soaked. So ready for us."

Reaper swipes my hair over my shoulder. "Shamefully needy little thing, are you?"

My response is a whimper as Breaker's cock slides up between my ass cheeks, dragging wetness up to press the fat head along my back hole. "Fuck, I want to take this ass."

A whiny, desperate sound slips past my lips from the feel of him there. With my leggings around my knees, I can't open further for him, even though I try, every inch of my skin singing.

"Do it," I grate. "Fuck me."

Breaker drags his length lower, scorching hot against the freezing air kissing my skin, and the thick head of it presses against the seam of my pussy. He grips my shoulder and lines himself up. Striker and Viper shift, sliding up next to Reaper in front of me.

Striker grips my cheeks, fingers digging into my skin roughly, as he rips his mask off. I exhale, warmth spreading through my already heated core when I see his ravenous expression. His mouth crashes onto mine. His clean taste invades my senses. Breaker presses into me, driving in slowly but merciless, until I'm gasping against Striker's mouth as he forces my body to accept him. He's so big, it feels like he's splitting me open, and I wince, a light moan slipping past my lips as he thrusts in, bottoming out before he can fully seat himself. Pain twinges in my core, and he withdraws, then without warning, Breaker slams forward. My mouth opens in a silent groan against Striker's lips at the brute force, slight pain blurring the lines with the pleasure of being stretched.

Breaker’s low, gravelly, grate makes me clench around him. “Fuck.” He pulls out just enough to slam forward again.

“Be gentle with her, Break,” Striker warns, breaking the kiss and caressing my jaw.

“Don’t be gentle,” I breathe, pushing back into him, molten heat curling low in my belly. I need to feel every ounce of him. Feel each brutal claim. I need it to hurt enough to cut through all doubts. Yet give enough pleasure to sate this dark primal clawing under my skin. “Fuck me harder.”

Using my shoulder for leverage, Breaker slams into me, faster, harder.

Viper’s hand fists in my hair. He jerks my head toward him, lining my gaze with the wild, dangerous look in his eyes. In one quick movement, he grips his mask and rips it free.

For a moment, I barely register as my body jerks forward from Breaker’s hard thrusts, I’m so fixed on the predatory need in Viper’s expression. The soft cheeks and strong jawline. The nose with the slight bump. How the purplish dying light glints in his auburn hair. The way waves curl around his ears.

Then, his mouth is on mine, crushing, devouring. Between Viper’s violent kiss and Breaker’s animal thrusting, I spiral outward, falling prey to his hunger. I bite Viper’s bottom lip, and he groans, shoving his tongue into my mouth. Breaker’s heat warms my back as he leans over me. His hot mouth skims the side of my neck, then teeth sink into the flesh, and one large hand squeezes my breast until it just barely doesn’t hurt.

“Use her mouth,” Reaper’s voice crashes through me.

Viper rips his mouth from mine. Leaning back on his heels, he claws at his belt, the sharp *clink* of metal slicing through the still woods. Reaper cups my jaw, watching my face like he’s cataloging every emotion.

“Come here,” Viper says, gripping my hair with one hand as he shoves his pants down far enough to free himself. My gaze drags back to the bright turquoise of his eyes. “Open for me.”

My lips part greedily, desperate to please. To be owned. To feel every promise they made. His hand spans my jaw, thumb skimming over my lips, brushing away the grainy dirt. His lips part, the pulse in his throat quickens, the hunger in his gaze brightening as I lick my lower lip.

“Suck the tip, Sweetheart,” he orders, voice guttural. He smears the slick tip of his cock over my mouth. I lick the hot slit, savoring the clean,

salty flavor of him, my eyes locked on his. The throaty moan he lets out as I suck the tip makes my pussy clench.

"Fuck." Breaker's hot gravelly moans against my skin, the way he thrusts forward, sends me higher. "Suck it harder, Tiny Thing. Make him beg for his girl."

I suck and Viper's head falls back, exposing his throat.

"Oh, fuck, that's so good." His thumb skims the corner of my mouth as his cock slips in. My lips catch at the head, then slide down the thick shaft. The moment he bottoms out, hitting my throat, my hunger grows, that feral thing in me pleading for more, filthy with need, soaking up his praise. "Good girl, take me all the way."

My moan drives him, and Viper thrusts wildly into my mouth as Breaker fucks me. My nails dig into the dirt and I meet each drive of his hips, until I'm groaning around his cock, saliva sliding down my chin to my neck.

He pulls out, gripping my hair and yanking my head back. "You want more, *mo leannan*?"

"Yes, please." The beg is feral, barely even sounding like me.

Breaker leans back up, thrusts slowing, as he grips my ass, spreading me open. I gasp, pulling cold air into my lungs as Reaper grips my jaw, turning my head toward Striker. Striker's hand slips around the base of his cock, already free and ready, angling it toward my lips, thick and swollen, slit wet with pre-cum.

"Suck his cock, greedy girl," Viper says as he grips my ass cheek, pulling me open. His finger skims along my hole, and I arch my back, allowing Breaker to fuck me deeper as Viper presses the tip of his finger into me.

Something wild flares through my veins, hungry and screaming for more. For them to be rougher. Fuck me hard and fast and dirty.

For them each to take me, use me.

Want me.

Cold air bites at my cheeks as Striker slips the head of his cock over my lips. I open for him, tongue darting out to lick the slit. Seawater and a clean sharpness flood my tongue. A glint of darkness clouds his gold eyes as I wrap my lips around him. Pleasure curls in my core as he slides in slowly, letting me taste his want. I work him with my tongue, hollowing my cheeks, keeping our gazes connected.

“Just like that,” Striker grates, thrusting forward hard enough that I gag.

His hand fists my hair, holding me still as he fucks my mouth. With Breaker’s harsh grip on my hips, Reaper’s hand on my cheeks, Viper’s finger moving into my ass, the heat in my belly rises, fissures forming in my molten core.

“Fuck,” Striker groans, popping free of my mouth.

“Come here, Kitten,” Reaper says. He grips my jaw as my body rocks back and forth from Breaker’s brutal thrusts, his warm fingers digging into my cold cheeks. He slips two fingers past my lips, pumping them in and out. I suck, savoring the earthy flavor mixed with dirt and skin. With his other hand, Reaper unbuckles his belt, and the entire world stops.

The darkening woods grow still, like every creature watching over us holds its breath. Breaker’s punishing fucking slows. Viper’s finger pressing into me eases as Striker’s grip in my hair tightens.

The metallic clink of his belt coming undone, then the grate of his zipper, cut through the air. I bite down on his fingers, my eyes locked on his hand as he pushes his fatigues down far enough that his cock springs free.

The world narrows to just him. To the tanned flesh and the chevron of muscle from his hips to his thick length.

“Come here, Kitten,” he rasps, voice velvety and full of want.

A twig snaps, and my focus expands to the press of bodies around me, barely blocking the scrape of icy wind on my bare skin. To the black-painted hunger in Reaper’s eyes. My whole body trembles from the feral coiling of something inside me. Something dark that’s lived in my blood ever since they took me. A solid, strong, and unbreakable thing that can withstand anything.

They didn’t break me.

They shaped me. Carved me into someone stronger and ready to fight.

For myself and Cora.

For them.

I’m ready to defend what is mine.

“Open for me,” he commands.

Reaper’s fingers slip from my mouth, and then he cups my jaw, guiding my mouth to his cock. He fists the base, fingers slick from my spit, dragging the head across my mouth. I open, greedy, needy, and he slides in,

just barely. My tongue skates across his slit, and the taste of him rips a groan from my throat. Smoke and cedar and dark earth. I suck the tip, then let him push deeper. The muffled, fractured sound he makes is half relief, half resentment, as he drives in roughly. I gag, tears pricking my eyes. He shudders as he forces himself into my throat, and sparks shoot down my spine.

“Come on, Kitten, let me in deeper. I know you can take it.” He’s still caressing my jaw, thumb stroking my cheek as he feeds himself slowly into my throat. It’s hard to take him deep at this angle, but he drives in, blocking my airway. I look up, hoping to see something, vulnerability or need, but the melting skull mask hides every feature, leaving only black starless night eyes drinking me in.

“Good girl,” he rasps, then pulls out. I cough, gasping for air right before he shoves his cock back in. Then they’re all moving again as he thrusts forward with an even rhythm, controlling my mouth with a deft, possessive hunger. I suck him harder, desperate to obey, nails digging into the cold earth as I brace myself.

“Her pussy is squeezing me so tight.” Breaker’s cock pistons in and out, Viper’s finger sinks into my ass.

“Take him deeper, Princess.”

I obey, swallowing him down.

“Good girl,” Striker’s gentle praise and grip in my hair sends me higher, pleasure snapping along my spine like fireworks. Reaper’s hand tightens along my jaw when I gag, flaming that carnal desire hotter.

“You’re taking us so well,” Breaker grates, words choppy. “Your little pussy is sucking my cock in so deep, taking every inch.”

He thrusts forward, pinning his hips to my ass. Pain sears through me as he seats himself deeply, but he eases up, fucking me again, and it’s replaced with white-hot pleasure.

With my hands in the dirt, rocks and sticks scraping my knees, being fucked brutally, my throat used, awakens that feral feeling inside me. I careen toward it, open, ready, and land, cracking open with a feral groan.

The world shatters. Every sense blurs, and I’m only faintly aware of Reaper’s splintered moan as I break apart. Barely aware of Breaker’s wild, guttural groan. His cock pulsing, and the heat spilling inside me, a full-body shudder moving through him into me.

Reaper withdraws from my throat, and I suck in air, my arms giving as my release fades. He eases his hold on me, and Striker's nails rake across my scalp as his grip tightens, keeping me upright.

"Oh, fuck, *yes*." Breaker's wild, guttural groan fractures in his throat. His movements ease to a slow, steady thrust. "Fucking perfect, Delilah, you're perfect."

Striker's other hand palms the side of my neck, bringing me back to center. My eyes clear, pleasure fading as Breaker pulls out. I wince, wet heat trailing between my thighs.

"God, look at you. So devastatingly beautiful. So perfectly ours," Striker says, each word raw. Wrecked. Like he just confessed his worst sin. "Come here and let me have you."

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Chapter 51

Striker

THEY SAY THAT FALLING in love is like falling off a cliff. Some people tumble over the edge headfirst, and when they land, they crack open so brutally they never recover. Some jump cleanly, feet first, crashing to the bottom only to be left broken and mangled, alive but so damaged that recovery seems impossible. Others sort of trip and fall delicately, hitting the water safely just as the tide comes in. Then there are those unfortunate ones who dive cleanly over, but hit every single rock jutting from the cliff face on the way down until they're so battered and bruised there's no hope for them.

I fell before I even knew I was falling.

It was a slow-motion careen more than a fall or tumble. I fell backward, looking up at where I'd come from, my hands outstretched, longing for the safety of where I'd come from, terrified because I couldn't see where I'd land.

Then suddenly I hit.

And I knew the second the air was knocked from my lungs my heart no longer belonged to me.

It was theirs.

Hers.

I drag Delilah closer, capturing her mouth, savoring the heat of her, ravenous for her sweet taste. Her soft moan batters at my glass-thin control, every sound creating more fissures. My fingers tighten in her hair, needing

the reminder that she's mine, all of ours, no matter how much it feels like this blooming thing might be ripped from my hands at any moment.

The weight of what we did to her sits heavy in my chest. Her trust, now, feels like a gift we never deserved.

Fallon was cruel. *We* are cruel, and everything in me screams to take back all the wrongs we've done.

"You're mine," I whisper against her lips, the words inadequate against the weight of our sins.

A small, choked sound slips out of her, and I eat it up, desperate for any taste of redemption. Breaking the kiss, I drag my lips along her jawline, trailing my other hand under her sweater, feeling her hips, her ribs. Pinching her hard nipple over her bra. Like I can imprint her with how much I crave her. Want her.

Need her.

"Lay her down," Reaper says, his voice gravelly as he fists himself, the head of his cock flushed and gleaming wet.

"Let's get these off first," Viper says and removes her boots one by one, and tosses them aside.

Breaker tugs his pants up over his hips covering his ass, his cock still hard and ready for more. He rips his shirt off, spreading it out on the ground, then collapses to his ass. Goosebumps break out along his inked chest, drawing my gaze. When his winter eyes meet mine, the urge to pull him near, taste his mouth, his skin, *him*, nearly owns me, but Delilah's whimper as Viper pulls her sweater over her head and removes her bra, shifts my focus back to her.

I ease her back, lying her on the shirt, her head landing on Breaker's lap. I grip her pants around her knees and slide them off, throwing them aside.

"Open for him," he says, stroking her temple. "Let him fuck my cum deep into that pussy."

She grins, sliding her hand up his smooth chest, then touches his lips. "You look so sweet, but god, your mouth is filthy."

Her legs fall open, and I wedge myself between her thighs, drinking in the sight of her. The last dregs of sunlight filter through the branches, casting rippling purple shadows along her skin. It catches in her hair spilling like ink over his legs. She's a vision, a goddess with raven hair, pale skin flushed pink, legs parted, spread out before me like an offering.

She’s so beautiful it wrecks me.

Viper moves out of Reaper’s way as he shifts, inching closer to Breaker so he’s kneeling above her head. He grips her under her arms and drags her back until she’s arched backward over Breaker’s thighs, then tilts her chin up with a gentleness that’s so unlike him, I can’t help but wonder if he’s feeling this bright, consuming ache too. She cranes her neck for him, her head dropping back, exposing the thin column of her throat, to lick the head of his cock.

“Fuck,” he grates, hips bucking, the head slipping over her lips. “Take my cock into that beautiful mouth.”

Her lips enclose over his tip as I guide myself to her, slipping my cock against the slippery mess Breaker left. I push in just enough and watch her flinch. Breaker wasn’t gentle. That same primitive need to claim her fully, drive myself deep into her, claws up my spine, but I keep myself in check, grinding my teeth as my cock slips just barely into her.

Viper drops to his knees in front of Breaker, so that we’re all once again framing her. He moves to all fours, and presses a kiss to her stomach.

“Let me taste,” he says, trailing a finger from her belly button to her clit. Goosebumps break out along her chest, then my view is blocked by his auburn hair. She gasps, back arching, hand flying to cup the back of his head, just as his tongue skates over my tip notched against her, snatching the air from my lungs.

“Fuck,” I hiss, weaving my fingers into the wavy strands. He grips my cock, slipping the tip into his hot mouth. My groan breaks through the woods, carnal and hungry, verging on desperate. Pressing my eyes closed, my fingers dig into his scalp brutally. “Good boy. Suck it. Fuck yes. Do it again.”

When he does, my hips snap forward and his teeth scrape my skin before I pop free of his mouth and he guides me back to her, then flattens his tongue between us.

“Eat that pussy,” Breaker groans, gripping the back of Viper’s head over my hand. “Suck up all my cum, filthy boy.”

My mind reels, and my focus drifts to Reaper as Viper eats at us both, licking and sucking and devouring. I inch into her wet heat as Reaper cups the nape of her neck, angling her head back further to take him. He feeds himself into her mouth, murmuring something, a praise maybe, the words misting through his mask, as he slips in deep.

My control shatters as her throat expands, the outline of his cock slowly slipping down her throat setting me on fire. I drive in hard. She clenches around me, her legs falling open wider.

“God, that’s beautiful,” Breaker growls, trailing a finger along the line of her throat.

Delilah flattens her palm to Reaper’s thigh as he bottoms out. The sight of his cock stretching her throat, Breaker tracing along the bulge to feel him inside her, Viper’s mouth sucking and licking the place where my body meets hers, nearly sends me over the edge.

I grip his hair by the roots, ripping him up just as Reaper slips free.

“More,” she gasps. “Give me more.”

“Greedy thing,” I growl, thrusting harder, her entire body rocking from the motion. “You have your mouth full of cock and your pussy stretched yet you’re still begging for more.”

“Yes. *Please*,” she whimpers. Her fingers wrap around Reaper’s base and she guides him back to her mouth.

“*Fuck*,” The sound he makes is feral, desperate and dangerous, and laced with a raw surrender. His head drops forward, hips jutting to drive his cock in deeper. “You take me so well, naughty girl. I’m going to fuck this throat raw.”

Her hands move everywhere. Shifting from Reaper’s thigh and reaching for Viper as he sucks a hardened pink nipple into his mouth, tangled in Breaker’s fingers at her throat, trying to ground herself or maybe just stay afloat as we own every inch of her.

I slam into her, over and over, stars exploding behind my eyelids, my cock throbbing as her slick heat grips me like a vise. My heart thunders, sweat dripping down my spine, the cold air just a whisper over my burning skin. Every nerve ending screams as her back arches, raw, primal sounds ripping from her making Reaper growl in response.

Reaper pulls back to give her time to breathe, skimming a hand along her stomach, then pinches her clit. She cries out but it's muffled as he drives in again, drowning her whimper with his cock. Her legs close around my hips, her back bowing.

Viper sinks his teeth into her nipple, and she moans around Reaper’s cock, gagging and gasping but never trying to pull away. I can feel her losing herself, surrendering to it, this carnal thing driving us all. Reaper’s fingers form a V between us, slipping over where we’re joined. I rip my

eyes from her beautiful body, and meet his. A dark, possessive need fires behind his eyes as he slips his fingers between us, rubbing my cock as I drive into her, gathering wetness then curls his fingers, slipping them slowly inside her.

"Fuck," I gasp, the sensation of his thick fingers plunging into her with me, stealing my breath.

"Fuck her harder," he grates. "Make her whimper on my cock."

She makes a sound that's purely animal, arching and whimpering as he fucks her with his fingers, matching the rhythm of my hips punching forward. Reaper drives his cock into her mouth, choking out the sound.

Breaker cups her jaw, his thumb tracing her bottom lip stretched around Reaper's thickness. "Good girl," he murmurs as Reaper's fingers twist in her hair, yanking her head back as his other hand traces the obscene bulge in her throat, his breath hitching when he feels himself through her flesh.

Her nipple slips from Viper's mouth with a wet pop, the peak glistening and reddened from his teeth. He grips the back of my head and angles my mouth to his. Pain blooms across my bottom lip as he bites down, sharpening all my senses. I keep one hand clamped to her thigh and slide the other along the sandpaper stubble along his jaw. When his tongue invades my mouth, I surrender completely, groaning as he devours me. His kiss burns through me like molten lava, consuming everything in its path. Every brutal thrust of his tongue mirrors what we're doing to her. Taking, claiming, marking.

His hand fists in my shirt, tugging me closer. I sink lower, my thighs pressed along Breaker's, driving into her wildly. There's something frantic and desperate underlying every slip of his tongue against mine. A hunger I've never tasted before. My brain tunnels, narrowing on the feeling of Reaper's fingers hooked into her, dragging the backs of them along my cock as he stretches her around me. How Viper devours my mouth like he wants to eat my every breath. How Breaker is inches away, watching me kiss the man he covets, how his hand lands on my lower back, almost reassuring. But then it all breaks away as Viper's head snaps back.

"Fuck," he hisses, head angled cruelly from Breaker's harsh grip.

"Give me that mouth," Breaker grates and drags him closer.

Breathing hard, hand gripping his cock, Viper shoves his mouth against Breaker's with a violence that rips a growl from his throat. Breaker

accepts it, gripping Viper's jaw, their teeth knocking together devouring each other's mouths. When they break apart, they stare at one another, almost resentful.

Beneath us, Delilah gasps as Reaper withdraws, a glistening thread connecting his cock to her lips. He cradles her head, his thumb catching a tear slipping down her temple. Viper descends like a starving man, devouring her neck with open-mouthed kisses that leave marks.

A possessive heat flares when Reaper allows Viper so close to his hard length, but then he adds a third finger alongside my cock, and lightning sears through my veins.

I clutch her trembling thighs, spreading her wider, focusing where we're joined. How her slick heat pulses around me, Reaper's fingers glistening as they slide against my shaft with each brutal thrust. On the primitive, obscene sounds of skin against skin, primal in the dark and quiet woods.

"Fuck, she's so tight," I grate, barely clinging to my sanity. My hips snap forward, relentless in a feral drive to hear her scream.

Viper leans up, hand fisted around his cock, pumping roughly. He slides his hand under Reaper's arm and presses it to her lower belly, adding pressure that makes us both grate out a ragged sound.

"Fuck, she's beautiful," Breaker whispers, awe coloring his voice as he grips the back of her head with Reaper. "She's so close."

"So is he," Reaper grates as our eyes lock, his gaze burning into me, almost predatory.

I shudder, the thing building between us all as consuming as a wildfire. Burning everything down around us, destroying all our walls.

"Come on, come for me," he growls.

I have no idea if he means Delilah or me, but then she shatters beneath us. Her spine arches, thighs trembling violently under my grip. A silent scream sticks in her throat before erupting into a raw, primal howl that echoes through the trees. Her inner walls clench around me with such force reality fractures at the edges.

The world narrows to pinpoints of sensation: my hands on her thighs, Reaper's knuckles brushing against my length as he drives in harder and faster. How Viper's pressing down hard to her belly, my cock hitting his hand from inside her with every thrust.

A calloused hand grasps my neck. The touch ignites something savage inside me and my release hits like lightning, white-hot and devastating.

"*Fu-ck*, yes, I—" The words die in my throat as my release claims me, a sound scraping from me more animal than human as Reaper's fingers slip out and I tumble over the edge. I collapse forward, seeking her mouth. Our teeth clash, tongues desperate as my hips stutter and my cock pulses deep inside her. Electricity races down my spine, and for one moment, I'm both ruined and somehow whole.

My mouth on hers, I consume every sound, tasting her surrender and the dark spice Reaper left on her tongue. Breaking the kiss, I gather her against me, collapsing backward with her in my arms. She straddles me, face buried in my neck, her tears hot against my skin. I crush her to my chest, pressing my lips to her hair, breathing her in, dragging in the scent of salt and earth and sex into my lungs.

Something raw burns in my chest. Bright and alive, almost terrifying in its clarity. It goes far past anything I've felt before, scraping me raw from the inside out, revealing truths I've buried so deep I forgot they existed.

My throat tightens, the idea of her going anywhere near danger shredding my heart. She's mine. Ours, but there is a brilliant, warm piece that is solely mine. A part she created just for me. I've had my brothers, experienced their blood-soaked loyalty, the unflinching protection. Felt their love, but I've never had this soft, delicate tenderness. Warm, giving lips and a gentle forgiveness that forces such brutal honesty from us all.

My chest cracks open, guilt flooding through like acid. I want to tell her I'm sorry that we loved revenge more than her. Than Cora. That I'm sorry it took us so long to see we put the dark need to get back at Rune, to get into his lodge, over her safety. Apologize for needing her to do it because we can't do it alone.

But the words grate in my throat, nothing but ruin, and I only manage to say, "You're mine," into her hair.

She nods, pulling back to press her lips to mine. "Yours."

"And mine," Breaker says, his voice thick. He pulls her back onto his lap, claiming her mouth.

When they break the kiss, Viper grips her hips and drags her to him. "Come here so I can take what's mine."

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Chapter 52

Viper

THERE'S A PULL IN me I can't ignore. Winding up in my ribcage, coiling in my throat, threatening to spring from my lips, and I know if it does, it will taste sweet and warm.

The way love does.

We earned her trust. But love? We ripped that from her and molded it to fit all of us. She had no choice. We forced her to accept us, to accept this wild feeling.

But with love, it's never a sure thing. It wavers. Doubt hums at the edges, dimming it until it's barely more than just a waning moon, growing smaller and smaller until it passes through all the phases, and suddenly it's just there, illuminating everything.

Right now, in the last scraps of daylight, it shines from her, raw and brilliant. Every barrier she's placed to keep us at arm's length is stripped away.

I trail a hand along her stomach, letting her brilliance light up my veins. "If only I could keep you like this, splayed out like an offering, pussy soaked and ready for me." I drag my hand down her thigh, savoring the sight of her spread out before me. She's already so used from them, stretched open and still so needy.

Striker and Breaker's cum leaks from her glistening pussy. Tendrils of hair stick to her neck. I swipe them away, running a finger along her collarbone. Goosebumps form, and her nipples pebble tightly in the frigid

air. Dirt clings to her sweat-slicked flesh. It streaks up between her thighs like war paint. Their cum turns it darker. Makes it gleam in the low light filtering through the trees.

She's untamed. Wild and desperate for more.

I gather up the wet dirt and smear it across her lips. "I can't wait to sink my cock deep into the mess they made of you."

She spreads wider, blue eyes locked on my face. A silent invitation to take what is already mine. I claim her mouth, every sweep of her tongue against mine, lined with possession and hunger and a terrifying tenderness.

"Come here, Kitten." Reaper shifts, straddling Breaker's leg, and drags her backward. She leans back, arching against Breaker's legs, her head falling to Reaper's chest. Striker inches in closer, one hand clasped around his still hard cock, and grips her thigh, pulling her open for me, until we're all just a tangle of limbs and desperation.

One of Reaper's hands wraps around her throat, the other flattening to her belly and drags it lower until he reaches her pussy. He spreads her open, exposing her pink slit, the wetness and cum leaking from her. My mouth waters at the sight, the need to taste her, *them*, sending a primal pulse through me.

"I should flip you over and fuck you like the wild little creature you are," I tell her. "But, fuck, I want to taste this messy pussy."

"Fuck yes," she breathes. Her gaze drags along my face as I move to all fours, and I lower my mouth to her glistening cunt. She skates a finger along my jaw. "My god, you're terrifyingly beautiful."

I grin before my lips clamp over her clit. Her strangled cry goes straight to my cock. Her hips buck as my tongue delves deep into her. Musk and salt flood my tongue, mixing with the earthy taste of Reaper's flesh, and I lap at her, eating their cum with long, slow sweeps into her opening.

"Eat that pussy," Reaper says, his voice low, a grating sound, like he's unraveling. "Fuck, she loves it."

A hand lands on the back of my head. "Filthy boy. You look good on your hands and knees," Breaker grates.

This hunger. This need. This wild desire to consume her drives my tongue deeper and deeper. Desperation hollows out my chest, needing to make her mine in ways I've never wanted anyone.

"Come on, get in there," Striker says, tugging at my fatigues, and slipping a hand underneath to cup my ass.

“Oh yes, please,” she groans. “Please, fuck me. I want you inside me.”

I kiss her clit and shift upright, wiping the dirt from my palm on my pants. Gripping my cock, I adjust myself between her thighs, lining myself up. Behind her, Reaper meets my gaze.

Something has shifted between us all. Breaker feels it. Striker as well. But I think Reaper is the one driving it. Feeding this dark, carnal force that has us all on our knees in the dirt, claiming her like animals.

“Take her,” he grates. His thumb presses to her clit, skimming along the head of my dick as he circles. When his eyes meet mine, fire ignites in my veins. “Fuck her like she’s yours.”

Like she’s mine.

I slam forward. She cries out, clenching around me. I still, seated deep inside her, drowning in the sensation of her walls clamping down on me as another wave of pleasure rushes through her. I’m already so spun up, so close to coming, so overwhelmed by the rush of emotions, that I pull out, clenching my teeth before driving back into her. Reaper makes tight little circles on her clit, drawing out her orgasm. Each time he does, his thumb brushes against my cock, and my brain scrambles.

Every rule we’ve had in place, every fragment of who we are supposed to be, gets tossed aside, and we’re just us. Living right now, in this moment.

No walls. No restraints.

Just pure need and the desire to belong to each other in any way possible.

Reaper shoves my shoulder and forces me back. I fall on my ass, my legs tangling with theirs. That animalistic hunger grows needier, more desperate.

He meets my gaze, onyx eyes burning with heat, then lowers his masked mouth to her ear. “Get on his dick and fuck him like you own him.”

Something seems to ignite in her, and she sits upright, taking my mouth with a hunger that steals my breath as she straddles me. Her small, warm palm lands on my chest, and she pushes me until my back hits the cold ground. Breaker untangles himself, fisting his cock that’s once again hard and ready. Striker scoots back, watching, his eyes growing darker with hunger.

“You’re mine,” she whispers, each word a possessive demand. “Say it.”

Weaving my fingers through the wild strands of raven black hair around her shoulders, I lick my lips and grin at her ferocious command. *God, this woman.* I’m so gone for her. For Cora. Dismantled and rebuilt by this burning feeling.

“Yours,” I say, and she grips my cock, guiding it back to her opening and slams down. The world collapses to this single point of connection, to her body wrapped around me, and I’m lost, found, destroyed.

“Shit, you feel so fucking good,” I grunt, grabbing her thighs, guiding her up and down over me as I thrust my own hips up to meet her. She groans, open and wanton, a wild animal riding me in the dirt and cold. Leaning forward, she covers my mouth with hers, swallowing down my growl, grinding down and rolling her hips.

Reaper grips her bare breasts, pressing his masked face into her hair. “You look good fucking him,” he says, his voice smooth yet frayed at the edges, like silk dragged over gravel. “But I think you can take even more, can’t you, Kitten?”

“Yes, please.” Her beg is fractured.

Reaper fists her hair and shoves her forward, the sound coming from his throat messy. She crashes against my chest, her sweat-slicked skin as hot as a brand against mine. Keeping her pinned by her hair, he slides his other hand between us, and drives two fingers into her, slipping it along my cock. My eyes squeeze shut at the sudden extra pressure. A growl rips free of me, guttural and choked, as I thrust up meeting her. Delilah lets out a louder, feral sound, abandoning any self-control as she grinds down.

Reaper grips his mask and rips it free. She must know, must sense it because her eyes flare, connecting with me as he curls over her back, brushing his lips along her temple. “You’re so beautiful. Reckless and needy.”

Our movements slow. Stop completely as she keeps her eyes locked with mine. Reaper continues stroking my cock with two fingers, stretching her open and stretching me thin.

“How bad do you want it, Kitten?” he grates. “Do you want two cocks fucking that tight pussy? To be so full you can’t even beg?”

“Please,” she whispers.

Reaper's hand slips from her hair down to the small of her back. He cups her ass, spreading her further on my cock. "Hold her open for me."

My heart thrashes against hers. She buries her face in my neck, and I feel her tilt her hips for him as I grip her ass and spread her open.

He lines himself up behind her, leaning back. She whimpers into the skin at my neck as he slips in, just barely. My vision blurs as the slick heat of him pushing, forcing his way in, every inch of his cock slipping against mine, destroying me.

"Reap, I swear, *I*—" I hiss, but everything I'm trying to say scrambles, leaving me in muttering curses. I have no idea what I'm trying to say. No clue what to say. I've done this, fucked a woman at the same time with Striker and Breaker but never Reaper.

No one touches Reaper but Striker.

"Be easy with her," I say, but fuck, he needs to be easy with me too. Even stretched, she's still so tight, I'm barely hanging on. Her walls flutter, tightening, making me grit my teeth.

"Fuck, that's it, Kitten," Reaper growls. "Relax and let me in."

She heaves out a breath, the burst of hot air heating my neck as she tries to relax. Inch by inch, he slides in until he's buried right up against me inside her, both of us wrapped in her wet heat, barely fitting. There isn't space for thought, for anything but the feeling of my cock being strangled, her gasping, half-sobbing into my neck, nails digging so sharp I think she might draw blood. When he slips out, then in again, I throw my head back against the dirt, nearly coming apart at the seams. She bites my exposed neck, whimpering with me.

Then he moves.

The world blurs, nothing but noise and slick fiery heat as Reaper drives in harder. Nothing but the wet and raw feel of him slicking against me inside her. She clamps around us, gasping like she's drowning. My fingers dig into her skin, using her to anchor me. Each thrust is a lightning crack. Each of her whimpers, building a desperate need in my chest.

"Fuck," I grate, pressing my cheek to the top of her head, my gaze blurred but on Reaper's face, watching his jaw flex, his eyes locked on where he's fucking into her. I snap my hips up gently and nearly black out.

"God, *fuck*—" she whispers, small spasms rolling through her. "Don't stop—don't—"

“Look at you,” Reaper groans, leaning forward to scrape his teeth against her ear. The weight of him pushes her against me, our chests slicking together as he continues to thrust. The heat of his breath fans my cheek. “You’re taking us both so fucking well, Kitten. Didn’t know you could be so greedy, did you?”

Her response is a whimper.

He leans back, taking her with him, pressing her against his chest. Delilah’s eyes flutter, and she keeps her eyes on mine, hands pressed to my chest. The angle has my arms flying out, my nails digging into the dirt, in an attempt to hang on. Reaper lets out a throaty moan, and we both still.

Surrounded by the dark woods, with the fading purple sky peeking through the black canopy above, he’s nothing but a dark animal, primal and demanding to own us, and the wild, slick pulse of him pressed against me. Breaker and Striker, just an ancient, hungry energy beside me. Delilah, a brilliant star in the shadowy night.

Reaper shifts, and my thighs lock around his at the tight rub of him moving into her deeper. “Breaker, Striker, fuck her mouth,” he grates.

Striker stands and Breaker moves in, both at the ready.

“Be a good girl and open again for me, Tiny Thing,” Breaker whispers, pressing the head of his cock to her lips. She greedily sucks him in, blindly reaching for Striker. He grasps her hand, guiding her to him, and she wraps him in a tight fist. Breaker pops free of her mouth, and she turns, sucking in Striker’s cock as Reaper moves, fucking into her, rubbing against me in slow, gentle strokes.

“Suck it, naughty girl,” he rasps. “Take all these cocks.”

Breaker fists her hair, holding her steady as Striker buries himself in her mouth, head falling back as she takes him deep. Breaker’s hand slides to her jaw, his thumb wiping a line of saliva down her chin, guiding her from cock to cock.

“Come on,” Striker says, gripping her throat. “Suck it just like that, beautiful. Let me fill that dirty mouth like I filled your pussy.”

Reaper slams into her, the impact rocking us both. Every muscle in me draws up tight until I can’t breathe. She gags on Striker, but she doesn’t stop. She’s greedy and insatiable, gravelly moans ripping from her.

“Good girl. Good fucking girl,” I rasp, my voice filthy.

Everything devolves into animal logic, growing hungrier. The wet, messy slap of skin. Her muffled moans. The sensation of her squeezing

around us, of Reaper's hot length dragging along mine, bleeding together until we're all just sound and sensation careening toward ruin. Nothing but rutting, hungry beasts.

Reaper wraps a fist in her hair and yanks her back, away from Striker's cock. Breaker slips back into her mouth with a messy, desperate sound.

"Good girl, take it all, take everything." Breaker groans. He drives deeper, both hands on her head now, holding her to him as he rocks into her throat.

Every time Reaper pushes in, she clenches tighter, and I can barely do anything but hang on, my nails in the dirt as he fucks her. When she pulses hard, her body trembling, Breaker pulls free of her mouth and she gasps.

"You can't come yet," Reaper grates, every word lined with raw desperation. "Be a good girl and beg for us, Kitten."

The "*Please, please, please. Please let me come,*" that rips from her throat has me slipping over the edge.

She gasps, her cunt pulsing, milking, her nails raking down my chest. That cut of pain unravels me. I drive up into her, and lightning snaps down my spine, shattering the world around into a thousand pinpoints of light, until I'm nothing but heat, exploding like a million supernovas. Faintly, I'm aware of Reaper's grating growl, his jerky movements. His cock pulsing, dragging ruinous pleasure along mine, and pushing me into oblivion.

When the world comes back around, I blink into focus, realizing I'm grasping her thighs brutally, and let her go. Above me, Striker's combing fingers through her hair as she licks at his cock, sucking cum from the tip. Breaker pumps himself, his cum covering her neck, slipping down her chest onto me. When they let her go, she falls forward, boneless.

The world hums, the dark woods, pulsing with life. It's like every inch of my skin, every sense, is awake for the first time in my life. Delilah breathes against my neck, soft and shuddering, and it breaks something in me. The need to protect her, to keep her, both of them, *all* of them, burns hotter than before.

Weaving my fingers into her hair, I breathe her in, taking her and the cold air into my lungs. She whimpers when Reaper slips free, his cock slipping against mine again before he stands.

His chest heaves as he sucks in lungful after lungful, his face slick with sweat, cheeks red. Tucking himself back into his pants, he licks his lips, ripping his eyes from mine as he swipes his brow, then slips his mask back on. “Come on. Let’s get her inside where it’s warm.”

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Chapter 53

Delilah

I JOLT AWAKE, A DISTANT slam shooting like lightning through sleep and forcing me conscious. Rolling to my side, I wince at the ache between my thighs. I glance toward the fireplace, now just low orange embers, barely lending any light or heat to the room. Shifting, grit drags across the sheets under me. Heat blooms at the memory of us all surrounded by dark woods, fucking like animals. I squeeze my legs together, loving the deep ache, but when I feel the mess, now dried, still lingering on my skin, I decide a shower is in order.

Like *now*.

I vaguely remember pleading with them as Viper carried me inside, to just let me sleep. That I'd bathe later. Being I passed out, he must have just let me sleep, though I fleetingly remember him placing kisses on my temple, whispering promises to return and clean me up soon.

I run a hand under Striker's enormous shirt they dressed me in before carrying me back, trailing a finger along the skin of my thigh to my core, sinking into the memory of what we did.

Fucked. Owned. Claimed.

It fizzles through my head like a fever dream.

The entire thing felt like one.

A soft rustle of fabric makes me freeze. I bolt up, my gaze landing on the chair by the window. It's dark enough that I think at first it's Reaper, but the faint glow of the fire outlines his sharp jaw. His perfect nose. Panic

slams into me as he stands, eyes catching the embers, lighting them like blue flames.

Hatred burns through me as he stares at me, slowly crossing the room.

“Why are you in here?” I ask Fallon, pulling the blankets up, aware I’m wearing nothing but Striker’s shirt and my socks, along with gritty dirt and cum. “Where are they?”

“All tied up at the moment,” Fallon says. He strides to the side of the bed, and the dim light from the table lamp flashes on. My face heats as he leans back, hands clasped behind him as he stares down at me. Assessing. “You’ve had quite the evening.”

I tuck the blanket up under my chin, my cheeks on fire.

“You have two choices, Delilah,” Fallon says, unclasping his hands to grip the blanket. I grasp it tighter, but he yanks it free, throwing it back. My fingers twist in the shirt and clasp it to my thighs, that fear he invokes, swirling through my gut. “You come with me willingly, or my sons suffer under the wrath of your poor decisions.”

“Those aren’t choices,” I spit out. “That’s a threat.”

He shrugs. “As long as you cooperate, my sons will remain unharmed.”

Molten heat fires in my veins. “How dare you say you love them, then threaten them at every turn?”

When the back of his hand connects with my face, my head snaps to the side, pain cracking across my cheek. I fall back from the force, tears stinging my eyes.

“Your mouth is wearing on me, Delilah,” Fallon hisses. “My sons have sacrificed the integrity of this mission for you. For that Julian whore.”

The fact they aren’t here, creates a sick panic. My heart thunders, eyes darting to the door. “Where are they?”

Fallon licks his lips and adjusts his black tie. Smooths down his black vest. He takes a step back, but it’s not far enough. Across the entire world wouldn’t be far enough.

“What did you do with them?” I ask, fear and anger winding up tightly in my chest. My eyes dart to my boots by the armoire. To my knife on the side table. Back to him. “Where are they?”

“My god,” he says, almost in awe. “You really do love them.” Unease coils inside me at how the words slip from him. Oily and gross.

Like loving them is a sin. He makes a sound in his throat. “I have to admit I’m impressed with Reaper’s tactic.”

Tactic. As if what I feel for them is something planted in my head. Carved into me without my permission. That sliver of doubt tries to dig back under my skin, but I refuse to allow it to burrow.

He crouches beside the bed, and I resist the urge to kick him away. Kick in his fucking teeth. Grab my knife and stab him like I did 57.

“While I admit I don’t understand the workings of this dynamic, I have to say, I’ve never seen them so passionate about anything other than avenging my son’s death.” With one hand, he drags a finger along my knee. I jerk, my pulse racing. “I also understand Cora Julian is a part of this strange little…” He pauses, searching for the word. “Entourage.”

“Leave her out of this,” I snap, trying to slip away, but his hand clamps down on my knee. That same fear I felt in the garden snakes through me, all too aware of his nearness, how exposed and vulnerable I am. How much he hates me.

“Too late. Reaper dragged the girl into this, and now she’s as deeply involved as you.” He squeezes my knee, then stands upright. “Now. Let’s go.”

“Go?” I ask, my brows knitting.

Fallon’s lip curls into a cruel smirk. “Rune will take one look at you, and he’ll be beyond devastated.”

“You mean to send me back now?” I glance down at the shirt and smears of dirt along my legs. “You can’t send me back like this. He’ll think…” My voice fades as it dawns on me.

That’s exactly what he wants. For my father to think I’ve been used and broken. If Fallon sends me back like this, in this state, Rune will go insane.

“Did you plan this?” I ask, cracks forming in all the claims they made. I shake my head, refusing to let him place doubt in me again.

They love me. We may not have said the words, but I felt it in every claiming touch.

Fallon chuckles. “No, dear girl. But I know my sons. Nothing but heathens, full of sin and lust.” He hooks a finger under my chin, tilting my head back, and drags his thumb along my cheekbone where he struck me. “Delilah Gavin, his perfect daughter, reduced to nothing but a dirty, battered whore. Serves him right for refusing to save you the first time.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, my mind splintering in different directions.

“Look what his greed has done.” Fallon ignores me. Wiping at a tear. “You are ruined and disgraced. He’ll easily hand you over and sell your soul.”

Releasing me, he takes a step back, then snaps his fingers. Two soldiers appear in the doorway. My heart thrashes, and I scramble back onto the bed. I don’t recognize these two.

“Uh uh, Delilah,” Fallon says. “Remember what I said.”

I freeze, my heart nearly beating out of my chest. He’ll hurt them if I don’t cooperate.

“Where are they?” I ask again, choking on fear. “Did you hurt them?”

“Like I said, they are all tied up at the moment,” he says, holding his hand out to me. “They will remain that way, unharmed, as long as you remain calm. Upon your return, they will be released.”

My chin quivers, and I move forward.

“Good girl,” he coos, making bile rise in my throat. “Once the mission is back on track, you’ll see them again. Promise.”

The Snyder Group. Slowly inching forward, placing my hand in his. He curls his fingers around mine and eases me off the bed. Once I’m on my feet, that gentleness disappears, and he yanks me forward, then places a hand on the back of my head and shoves. I stumble, crashing to the floor. My knees hit the cold wood, and I gasp, stunned at his sudden roughness.

“Restrain her,” Fallon barks.

The two soldiers march forward and grab my arms. The urge to fight, to defend myself, just as I’ve been taught for weeks, almost wins, but I bite down on my lip, keeping useless threats, vile curses, and terror trapped inside, willing myself to remain calm.

The two soldiers wrangle my arms behind my back. I wince at how rough they are, wanting to snap and bite and resist. One steps in behind me, and cold plastic weaves around my wrist, and the familiar grating sound of a zip-tie cuts through my skull.

My pulse skyrockets, tears stinging my cheeks. “I’m fucking cooperating,” I growl.

“I promised not to hurt your lovers,” Fallon says, circling until he’s in front of me. Those pale eyes and cold, cruel smirk burn into me. “I never

said anything about not hurting you."

My lovers.

Not his sons.

"Take her downstairs."

One soldier grips my shoulder and shoves me ahead, guiding me out the door. In the hall, I trip over my feet, my breath seizing in my lungs. Soldiers line the far wall, one after another, all the way down the hall, to the stairs. As I'm led forward, more come into view, a black line of hard, stiff bodies snaking down the steps, eyes of various colors watching me as I descend.

There must be at least fifty, if not more, black-clad soldiers framing the foyer, blocking the doors.

"How many are there?" I ask, my words breaking the deadly quiet.

"There are currently fifty here," Fallon says. "More in training at my new facility."

My stomach tumbles. They are horribly outnumbered.

The men can't just leave him. Fallon has far too much power over them.

The only way they can escape is if he relinquishes his control.

Or he dies.

"Why?" I whisper, stopping at the foot of the stairs. Fallon descends, stopping next to me, taking in the sight of pure, militant power, all under his command.

"Revenge," he says simply. "Everything Rune has built must be destroyed."

I open my mouth to ask why he just doesn't send them to kill Rune now, when I remember. I sweep my gaze around the room and lock on Fallon's face. "What do you need to get out of Rune's safe?"

He takes a deep breath. "Something Reaper refuses to let go." Fallon clears his throat, then reaches in his pocket and pulls out a syringe, and faces me, tapping at the plunger. Clear liquid spits from the needle, and a smile quirks his lip. "Hold still, this will just pinch a little."

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Chapter 54

Cora

IT'S BEEN FOUR DAYS since they left. Each day, I have woken up in Clyde's guestroom that's now littered with my belongings, and dressed for work, putting on my armor of finely cut suits, and stiletto heels. Then every day after work, I return to his house and spend the evenings with him in his home range. My aim has improved tremendously, and I can reload any gun within seconds.

Each day, I think about marriage and murder and how in this family, they seem to go hand in hand. Rune gave me to Zane so he could marry me, breed me, steal my money, and then what?

The truth hangs over my head, heavy and dark. Zane would have taken a hit out on me the second I gave him what he wanted. What the families wanted. A kid to inherit his wealth and my money.

The fact Rune knew this and still made the deal leaves a dull ache in my chest. Even after everything, it still hurts that I'm so expendable.

But those plans didn't work out, and now he's desperate. He thinks that by handing me over to Viper, he'll gain even more power thanks to the Snyder Group. They are wealthy. They sell weapons. Rune holds illegal hunts for his boys' club. He more than likely added the same demands he did with Zane. Marry me and hand over the shares to his company. Keep me, my money and property, if he wants.

Breed me to strengthen the family bond.

My face heats and I drop my gaze to the stack of pancakes on my plate.

"What's wrong with you?" Clyde asks. I swear I feel his eyes boring into me. "Are you blushing?"

"No," I snap. "I don't blush."

"You're as red as a firetruck," he says. "Are you sick?"

My fork *clinks* loudly enough to make me wince as I stab at my food. We're late going into the office today, thanks to Clyde insisting on breakfast. So instead of sitting in traffic, we're in his sterile kitchen, the morning sun gleaming off every bright white surface.

Including my fire-engine cheeks.

"Am I really supposed to marry him?" I ask, swirling syrup and melted butter around my plate. "How is that going to work?"

When I dare to meet his eyes, Clyde's murderous expression makes my face flame hotter. He shovels pancakes into his mouth like he's forcing himself to remain quiet.

We don't discuss the topic further—the fact I'm involved with all these men—and continue to avoid it on the drive to the office, which is for the best.

He doesn't know I'm fucking Delly too.

Once we arrive, I go to my office, and he joins Rune just as he has for the last four days. I dive into my work, silently wishing I was curled up in bed with Viper and Breaker again. With Striker. Reaper too, even though he's dark and a little mean.

Wishing Delly were here, and that we were all together again.

I like the thought of us all together. Back at the mansion overlooking the sea. But she has to return for their plan to work, and the thought of Delly returning and finding out that the men plan to kill Rune unravels the fantasy. I know part of her wants him dead. She was so angry after she discovered the truth about Rune and me, but I'm not sure if she truly wants him to die.

He's still her father.

Thanks to my mother, he's the only blood she has left.

When I grab a cup of coffee from the breakroom, the office rumors about Delly's absence finally make their way to me. *She's had a nervous breakdown. Having surgery. Got caught with those men we fucked in Rune's club, and Rune's trying to save face by sending her away.* I ignore them all

and pretend, pretend, pretend. I stay hidden in my office all day, going over files, avoiding Zane and Rune and any meetings.

So far I've been lucky, and haven't had to deal with either man for the last four days. They seem to have lost interest in me now that Viper and Breaker have left to finalize the shipment of the rest of the weapons to Rune's lodge, where Clyde says he'll be traveling soon. Right after the Snyder Group goes through the initiation to complete the contract.

The contract that will add them to Rune's secret file.

I click the end of my pen, staring out my office window at the blinking lights of downtown, brilliant little beads of starlight in a vast darkness, knowing that I'm going to end up at that damn lodge. Several members have their wives join them, and now that I'm technically promised to Viper, I have a feeling I'll be forced to attend their little hunt.

The thought sends a shiver down my spine. While I've never shied away from a good steak, just the idea of being forced to eat some gamey deer they hunted down for sport makes my stomach roil.

The knives the men sold to Zane flash in my head. That's an excessive amount of weapons for a game hunt led by a handful of men and in the middle of nowhere.

Then again, the entire thing feels unnerving. Add in the list of dead members and the strange tally system, and my brain has been working overtime trying to figure out what Rune is up to. He fired all his security, the men who do his dirty work, and his staff. So unless he's planning on weaponizing an entirely new army of henchmen to do his bidding, the only thing I can come up with is that he plans to resell the weapons to his club members.

With a sigh, I click the pen several times, then drop it in the little wooden tray on my desk. I've been going over ledgers, prepping for the one meeting I can't avoid tomorrow, and after several hours, my head hurts. Picking up my phone, I unlock the screen and see a text from Clyde, telling me he has a late meeting and to call for Conner when I'm ready to leave.

Seems the constant threat of Rune's sickness is no longer a problem now that Viper agreed to marry me.

And killed a man.

I shake my head, ridding myself of the image of the blood spraying from Damon's neck. The possessive gleam in Viper's eyes.

The feral protectiveness of these men surpasses Clyde's.

I definitely don’t hate it.

My office door opens, and I swivel around in my chair, expecting the woman who runs the nightly cleaning crew to pop in, but the second I see his sleek blonde hair and smarmy face, my stomach drops.

“Get out,” I say, pointing to the door, but he’s already shutting it behind him.

“We need to talk,” Zane says, striding across the room until he’s right in front of my desk.

“I have nothing to say to you,” I snap, grabbing files and shoving them in the top drawer.

“Funny, because you never seem to keep your mouth shut.” He drops down into the oversized leather chair across from my desk and loosens his dark green tie. “Oh wait, that’s because you’re too busy sucking dick.”

“Come up with new material, Zane. It’s getting old.” I push up from my chair, and grab my bag, stuffing in a few files to take back to Clyde’s and look at later. “What do you want?”

“We have a meeting tomorrow.” He frees his tie and rolls it up, then tucks it in his pocket. He’s removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, giving him a casual appearance. To anyone who doesn’t know him, Zane looks like a regular handsome businessman, ready to take on the world.

But I know him and that smug smile. He’s up to something.

Again.

I still haven’t decided if he was just being his usual asshole self or if he was trying to sabotage the deal with Viper and Breaker so Rune would be angry with me.

Maybe both.

“Informing me of a meeting requires a personal visit?” I ask. “Could have been an email.”

I grab a few more files, but groan when I realize the contract I printed up for Rune isn’t on my desk. He must not have had his secretary return it to me this afternoon after he made corrections. I curse his refusal to use modern technology. Everything gets printed, and thanks to him, I don’t have the changes he wanted me to make, which means I won’t have it ready for tomorrow’s meeting.

With a sigh, I glare at Zane. He still has that slappable look on his face. “Did Rune give you the contract this afternoon?”

He shrugs, lips turning down at the corners. “He left early to work from home before the dinner meeting.”

Dammit. Now I’m going to have to go to his house before I return to Clyde’s. My heart skips a beat, dreading going there. I could wait, but—

“Your daddy was into it, you know.”

All thoughts slam to a halt. I blink, refocusing on Zane. “What?”

“Drake loved watching Caroline get railed,” he says, studying my reaction. “He would jerk off while he watched.”

Disgust roils through my stomach. A stabbing pain shoots through my fingertips. Darkness tugs at the corners of my eyes, trying to drag all those horrible memories into focus. I suck in a breath, refusing to allow them to take center.

“Drake was a nice enough guy.” Zane taps the armrest, drawing my attention to his manicured nails. “Though the fact that he let your mom put you in a closet was seriously fucked up.”

The words stab through my chest like a serrated knife. An echo of Zane’s laughter as my mother locked me away cracks through my head. I grab my bag. I will not let him rile me. He had enough fun the other day, simply because I had no choice.

I had to react.

Now I don’t.

“Fuck off, Zane,” I say, making sure my voice is even. Callous like his.

“Did you know your father liked to be tied up?” The glee in his voice sends a shiver down my spine. “He even liked licking my cum off my dick.”

“*Eww*.” I shoulder my bag, my heels clicking sharply as I continue to march around my desk. “Can you refrain from giving me details about your depraved sex life with my dead mother and father, please?”

“Rune doesn’t care I was fucking your mommy.” He rises from the chair lazily, dragging his eyes over me. “He’d probably have fucked her too if he didn’t have such a hard-on for Sophia. But then he’s always had a thing for young girls.”

I pause. Delilah’s mom.

I only have a few memories of her. Her laughing at dinner parties. A few lunch dates where we all went shopping. She was beautiful. Regal.

Kind. Everything my mother was not. How she was such good friends with my mother is a mystery. Makes me wonder if she even had a choice.

Zane steps in front of me, and my heart pounds. I hate that he knows he's got my attention now. Hate that he can see that he scares me a little.

A lot.

My fingers curl into the straps of my bag as I adjust it on my shoulder, trying to hide my nervousness behind a smirk. "And you like them older."

He grins, this gross, slick curve of his lips that makes me grateful for Viper. For Clyde. "Rune likes them young and quiet, but then you know that."

My cheeks heat. I inch around him, and head for the door. Zane darts in my path again. My heart tumbles, all too aware we're alone on the floor, with only a few stragglers and the cleaning crew.

"Did you know how old Sophia was when he bought her?"

"Bought?" I ask. Of course, I vaguely remember the fight between my mother and Sophia years ago. Something about Sophia only having Rune and all her wealth because he was obsessed with her.

Obsessed to the point he ensured she was his.

Rune has always had money and power. Inherited it from his parents and built his empire. It would make sense he had an arranged marriage to Delilah's mother, though her family was never mentioned. I have no idea where she even came from.

"She was quite expensive," Zane says. "I learned that tidbit from your mommy dearest. She loved to talk, that woman. Your father too. Drake and Caroline were chatty. Running their mouths is what got them in the end, isn't it?"

My heart races at how boldly he's talking about this. "Rune got them in the end," I say.

That slick smile returns. "He did. He really did."

"What do you want, Zane?"

"Your silence," he says, voice growing cold. "I've kept up my end of the bargain, now I need reassurance you're going to keep your mouth shut."

"A deal's a deal," I say, uneasy with the sudden shift in him. He's gone from smug to aggressive in seconds. "You did what I asked. I have no reason to talk to Rune."

He steps closer and grips my forearm. I jerk back, fear tingling my cheeks.

“I know they go to you,” he seethes. “Rune thinks you’re too stupid, but those fucking liars got in your head, didn’t they?”

My gut bottoms out. *They*.

The men.

“You were gone for weeks,” he says. “You come back and they did this.” He lifts his broken hand. “I did what you asked, and you still told them to do this.”

My laugh makes his jaw grind. “You really think I picked up a phone and ordered men—men who I can’t even identify, mind you—to come fuck up your hand?”

“He broke into my house,” Zane seethes, leaning forward to get in my face. “That same fucker who attacked me on the sidewalk.”

“My god, Rune is rubbing off on you. Paranoia is eating your last brain cell.” I point to the door. “Get out of my office.”

He steps in closer, his cologne filling my nose, making my belly twist. “You know who they are, don’t you? Those men you fucked?”

Better men than you, I think, but say, “Hired kidnappers? Hitmen? I have no clue, Zane.”

It’s getting easier and easier to lie.

A dark, angry gleam flashes behind his eyes as he huffs out a humorless chuckle. Alcohol fumes hit my nose. He’s been drinking and no doubt popping pills all week. Explains his erratic behavior.

“Back off. Remember what happens when someone touches me,” I snarl. “And I don’t think my new fiancé will like you near me.”

The flicker of fear across his face tells me he definitely remembers. But it melts into a smirk. “Fiancé? Sure took to that title well.”

“It’s easy to accept when the man I’m forced to marry has an enormous dick and knows how to fuck.” Now I lean in, glaring up at him, whispering, “And Ben is just as kinky. Double win for me.”

His jaw grinds. “Rune sure fucked you up.”

“Mommy did a fine job of that all on her own,” I say, shoving at his chest to force him back and walking past. “But then I’m sure you remember her well.”

“God, I do. So fucking well.” He makes a sound in his throat, dirty and lined with something cruel. I’ve never seen this side of him. Zane is

gross, yes, but never so openly disgusting. “I still think about her. How her mouth felt wrapped around my cock. Her blood-red lips. The woman sucked dick like a Hoover vacuum.”

I wince at the imagery, making him laugh as I cast him a glare over my shoulder, and throw the door open. The long hall looms, empty and dark except for the emergency lights. Zane follows me, close enough that the skin on the back of my neck pricks.

“Do you know who you remind me of?” he asks when we reach the end of the hall. “A lamb.”

“Let me guess, because Rune likes them young?” I stop at the elevators and jab the button.

He slides in beside me, resting his shoulder on the wall. “Because he’s willing to sacrifice you to get what he wants.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, my heart skipping.

“Marry you off. Fuck your innocence away.” Zane’s gaze slips down my body, taking in my red suit, like he’s remembering the shape of my breasts. Imagining me on my knees in front of him again. He grins. “You know he told me about taking your virginity. He had it all planned out. How and when he was gonna do it. Said he could almost hear your father’s screams from hell as you bled all over his dick.”

I react before I’m thinking, and his head snaps back from the impact of my hit. My fingers curl and I grip my bag, stopping myself from hitting him again.

A gritty laugh slips out as he rubs his cheek. “Remember what I told you,” he says, backing away.

“Which part,” I snap, “you’ve been running your mouth endlessly.”

“Those soldiers? Those men you fucked? They are liars, like you.”

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Chapter 55

Cora

ON THE RIDE BACK to Clyde's house, Zane's sick words spin in my head, tumbling around with everything else I've learned, and I almost forget I have to stop by Rune's house. I debate waiting until the morning, but know if I don't get the papers tonight, I'll suffer Rune's wrath tomorrow when he finds out I never made the changes to the contract.

"Is Rune home?" I ask Conner. When he meets my eyes in the rearview, I ignore the gross feeling in my gut screaming in horror that he's known I've been fucking Rune all these years.

That Zane *knew*. That Rune talked about it to him. Planned the way he was going to ruin me.

I hope Zane was just being vile, and that none of it was true. If it is, I can't fathom the depth of Rune's depravity. Violating me, hurting me, is bad enough, but the thought of him planning it? Fantasizing about it?

"He is supposed to be at dinner with Don and Linda," Conner says. "I dropped him off a few hours ago."

I recognize the names. Some of his lodge buddies.

"Swing by his house so I can grab some files, please," I tell him, breaking his knowing gaze, and looking at the city in the distance. "It'll just take a minute."

After Conner parks in the driveway, I check the time on my phone then toss it onto the seat and hop out. When I punch in the code, I glance at

the camera by the door, and wave, smiling for Rune, who's no doubt getting the alert on his phone.

"Picking up the contract, Papa," I say to the camera over the front door, sweat forming under my arms.

The alarm beeps and I shove the door open. Cold, stale air blasts my face. I shut the door, enveloping me in the eerie quiet of the house. The faint light from the sconces cast everything in a sickly yellow glow. Goosebumps form along my arms and scalp. I scan the foyer, slowly releasing the door handle and lean sideways to look down the hall, unease rippling in my gut.

Calm down, Cora. No one is here.

With that thought, and not wanting to be here if Rune leaves dinner early, I rush toward the office. The second I open the door, I still.

Rune looks up from behind his desk, blinking and obviously startled.

My gaze lands on his open laptop resting on the center of his desk.

Shit.

"Cora," he says, but my name comes out hoarse. A little thready. "Come here."

My heart thrashes, excuses rushing through my brain, but all the reasons I need to suddenly go without the papers I came for, dies on my lips when I notice the way his arm moves in his lap. Up and down. Up and down. Slowly. Rhythmically.

No.

I shrink back, the realization of what he's doing making my stomach drop to my toes.

My god, he's watching porn and masturbating.

His eyes drift to the laptop, and his head drops back slightly, the blue hue of the screen outlining his features, turning them sharper. He lets out a heavy groan as his arm moves faster.

"Get over here," he says, the words a grating command. "Come play with Papa."

My foot slides back over the threshold.

Rune's face hardens. "Get over here." His arm jerks faster, each upward stroke a little rough.

I shake my head again, unable to form a single word. I've never caught him masturbating, but I can imagine exactly how this will end. With me bent over his desk, screaming.

“I’m going to leave,” I say. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Rune shoots up from the chair, and his full body comes into view. He grips his hard dick tightly in one hand, his other holding faded red material, running it over the tip.

“Come here,” he says, hips bucking into his hand. “I won’t hurt you.”

Every breath I suck in lines my insides with a sludgy darkness. If I fight him, no one is here to stop him. Rune’s proven time and again that I can’t overpower him. He’s too strong.

“I don’t think Vincent would like that,” I whisper, knowing it’s a weak excuse. Rune gets what he wants when he wants it.

“He won’t know, sweet girl,” he grates, voice turning smooth. “I’ve been thinking about you all day. How pretty you are. How hot and tight you feel.”

I grind my teeth, avoiding looking at his dick. “I’m on my period,” I lie, knowing damn well that’s never stopped him before.

“It’s okay, I just want you to suck the tip a little.” He runs the red material over his dick again, eyes dropping to the laptop. A faint sound comes from the computer.

A groan? Moan?

Scream?

I’m not sure why the sight of Rune watching porn and fucking his hand makes me sick. More than anything I’ve experienced from him so far. Maybe it's the delight he’s taking in it. The sick gleam in his eye as he watches the screen. Or the throaty, heavy breathing that I recognize.

“Let me come on those pretty tits,” he says, stroking harder. Faster. His gaze lands on me, his fist tightening. He clenches his teeth. “Don’t make me fucking repeat myself, girl.”

Swallowing the bile that rises in my throat, I glance over my shoulder toward the front door.

“He won’t take you back,” Rune says, reading my thoughts. “He will help me bring you back inside and hold you down if I tell him to.”

Conner.

Did he lie to me?

“Get over here, Cora. Now.”

Tears prick my eyes as I try to figure out how to get out of this unscathed.

He grunts, hips jerking. “Come watch this with me.”

I take a step back, but he lets go of his dick and bolts forward. A scream peels from my throat as I bolt for the foyer, but he grips me by my hair, yanking me backward. My ankle twists, my heel flying off as he drags me toward his office. I grip his hand woven in my hair, my scalp burning as I try to keep my footing. Rune drags me through the door, and across the room, then slams me down into his chair so hard my teeth clank together.

“Fucking listen to me!” His guttural scream rips through me. He grips my chin, forcing my eyes to his. “Sit here and do not move.”

A flurry of movement and flashing lights from the video flickering in the corner of my eye, snags my focus for a heartbeat, but he moves closer, his dick inches from my face. I keep my gaze fixed on Rune’s mouth, my heart pounding so hard I can barely breathe past it.

“Fucking watch,” he says, taking his dick in hand, wrapping it with the red material, stroking the length hard and slow. “We’re almost at the best part.”

My gaze fixes on the red silk he’s running over his dick, and an inkiness skitters over my skin. The material is faded. Torn. The delicate lace, nearly in shreds. It looks old. And dirty.

I grind my teeth, fighting the urge to vomit. He’s jerking off with old, dirty panties.

“I made this just for you,” he groans, gripping my hair and twisting my head toward the screen. “So you could see how perfect it was. How perfectly I executed my plan.”

Horror wraps around my throat as my focus lands on the USB drive stuck into the side of the laptop.

The one from his desk drawer.

The one under the hunting knife.

My fingers curl into a fist.

Bile burns my throat, Zane’s words ripping a hole in my chest.

Please tell me he didn’t record raping me.

Rune groans, his dick bobbing up and down inches from my face. I close my eyes and breathe through the fear. My fingers creep up along the bottom of the desk, toward the slightly open drawer.

“Turn up the volume,” he grates. “I want to hear her scream.”

I freeze, my fingers brushing along the cold handle of the drawer.

Her.

A tremble moves through my hand, horror traveling up my arm to my shoulders. I squeeze my eyes shut.

Did he hurt Delilah?

Tears stab my eyes. I keep them pressed closed, not wanting to know. Not wanting to see.

She would have told me, wouldn't she? Did she lie, or is it some other girl Rune's hurt?

He likes them young.

"Turn it up!" he screams. He shakes my head so hard my teeth rattle.

"Okay," I breathe, choking on a sob.

Slowly, my body unfreezes, eyelids opening. I lock them on my trembling hand as my fingers trail along his desk, over the keyboard, and I hit the silver button, keeping my eyes on my hand so I don't have to see a young girl being hurt the way I was.

From the laptop, a loud thudding sound, made tinny by the small speakers, hits my ears. Then harsh breathing.

Rune grips my head and snaps it back. I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Fucking look!"

Heat from his hard dick hits my cheek. Pre-cum mixes with my tears. The fabric of the underwear rubs my face, and I gag, trying my best to swallow down the terror. A faint whimper from the laptop makes my chest heave. I recognize the sound. It's the anguished cry of defeat as your will and choice are taken.

"Please," I beg, tears bursting free. "I don't want to see."

"Open your fucking eyes and look!"

A loud scream echoes through the speakers. Something familiar tingles at the back of my brain. Tears blur my eyes, but I open them, and for a minute, I'm not sure what I'm looking at.

Woods?

My vision swims, but I can make out tall pine trees and gnarled branches. Daylight streams through the canopy overhead. In the distance, a large wooden building appears, but then the camera pans out and drops, moving in quickly like whoever is recording is too excited to stand still.

"Let me see." My blood chills when I hear his voice. I heard it so many times when I was younger, muffled by the closet door.

"Watch," Rune grates out.

The camera turns upright, and bright sky and emerald green leaves fill the screen, but then it adjusts and centers on two forms, blurring for a moment then focusing.

Two figures I recognize.

“No,” I breathe, frozen, unable to look away.

NO. NO. NO.

“This is what happens when you betray me.” Rune’s voice is far away, barely threading into my thoughts.

The camera zooms in more, capturing the scene fully, then pans over the two bodies tangled together on the forest floor.

Rune. But younger.

Fifteen years, to be exact.

Rune’s jerky strokes match the brutal pumps of the younger version of him. The one driving wildly into the body beneath him, the camera catching every horrid detail. The dirt on his clothes. The pale gleam of her skin as she claws at his bare back. The red hair fanning out over the forest floor, no longer vibrant like mine, but matted and dirty.

The camera swings, and then her face comes into view. I shake my head, my hand flying to my mouth to keep in my scream.

The camera zooms in on the knife, held brutally against pale skin. A thin trail of blood leaks to the ground.

When the knife digs deeper, sliding across her neck, she screams.

Wet heat hits my face.

I shove back, my ass slipping from the chair. I hit the floor. Her scream cuts off. Turns garbled and wet. I scramble backward, swiping Rune’s cum from my cheek, trying to get as far away from him as possible.

Away from the sick video and his throaty laugh.

My heel slips as I stand, and I catch myself on the edge of the desk. I don’t hear what he says. Barely see as I run from the room. There’s just noise in my head mixed with her garbled choking and his mocking laugh. I choke on a sob, then fling the door open.

Cool night air hits my face, and I rush down the stairs, the concrete drive scraping my bare feet.

My hands clamp down over my ears, trying to block out the sound, but it’s all I hear. Hear her screaming so loud, I feel it in my own throat, ripping out of me raw.

Rune killed my mother.

He slit her throat as he raped her. The day she went to his lodge, excited and energized. The last day I ever saw her. One of the few days she was ever nice to me.

He killed her for calling a hit out on his wife.

And he had Zane record it.

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Chapter 56

Viper

15 years ago, September, Age 17

"WE'RE CLOSE," HE SAYS, gripping my shoulder and forcing me down to the ground with him. "Stay alert. Move slow."

I crouch next to Hunter, scanning the woods, my grip on the knife tightening. We aren't too far from where we parted ways with Reap and Breaker. Maybe a mile at most.

"How do you know?" I ask, my voice low. "Have you been there?"

He nods, pulling his glove back, checking his watch. "Yeah. We made it here for pickup. Took a while to find it, but we survived and made it here."

With Seeker's body.

Goosebumps break out on my arms, remembering their return. Reaper had been covered in blood, and I had assumed he had been the one to kill our brother. Hunter confessed to us all later that night that it had been

him who slit his throat. Seeker had asked for his death to be quick, and when he didn't see it coming. Hunter said he did it so Reaper didn't have to. Then they dragged his body the last few miles so they could bring him back to us.

Now here they are, back in this hellish place, except instead of knowing they have to kill, they are trying to save their three remaining brothers.

Hopefully we all make it out alive.

"Father picked you up at the lodge?" I ask, confused. "Why here and not the airstrip?"

He glances over his shoulder, then at me before slowly standing. "There's a huge clearing in the center. We were instructed at drop-off to find it. When we arrived, we called father on the phone inside. Father landed the chopper there so he could talk to that Gavin guy when he picked us up. They had some sort of meeting, but the guy was late. Planning his kid's birthday or something." He shakes his head and makes a sound in his throat. "Can you believe he talked to him? Father stood there, talking like he had no idea what was coming."

My brows knit. "Wait…" I look around at the woods. We're all familiar with the name. His face. Father has a picture of the Gavin family in his office. They are friends. Good friends. *Were* friends. "That makes no sense. Isn't he the reason you and Reaper —"

"Yeah. Fucked up, right?" Hunter says, cutting me off. He shoots me another look. "And now it's come back to bite Father in the ass."

I shake my head, confused. Father has talked about Gavin and his family our entire lives. While we've never met him, we know about him. But we had no clue he was part of this. The wilderness. "But how is Maxy involved?"

"Father is a greedy bastard. He said it himself—he takes no sides." Hunter tugs me up, urging me forward. He casts another look around the woods before we begin moving. "Appears Maxim chose a side, and it's not Father's."

"Gavin is—" I start, but Hunter puts his arm up, fist closed, signaling for me to freeze. I stop, eyes darting around. Hunter tugs his ear, then points ahead, letting me know he heard something. My gaze darts that way, looking for signs of movement as we both slowly lower to one knee.

After a few agonizing seconds, Hunter signals for me to remain silent but to move forward. Gingerly I rise, my body so tense I'm barely breathing, and creep forward, careful of each step. I adjust my grip on the knife, hoping I don't get shot by whoever is out here.

Or Maxim. The *fucker*. The thought he and whoever else is out here with him intends to kill us like they did with that man, chills my blood. The way that man was torn apart was beyond depraved.

The image of the red strands of hair tangled in the branches, flashes through my head. My stomach twists at the thought of a woman out here, terrified. Screaming.

I exhale, hoping we aren't too late, though I have a sinking feeling we are.

Hunter signals for me to follow him, but remains silent. He adjusts his rifle, prepared to shoot as we move forward. We keep a slow, steady pace, and after a few minutes, I make out a clearing between the trees and what looks like a huge log building. He signals for me to halt and points to the left, indicating for us to move in that direction. We circle the clearing, but stay in the cover of the trees, careful to make no sound.

To my left, a loud crack of laughter rings out, making my stomach drop to my toes. Hunter raises a fist. We freeze. I stop breathing, waiting to be ripped apart by a bullet. When nothing happens, we inch forward, keeping low.

My guts churn with unease, my heart thundering so hard it makes me dizzy, but I keep close to Hunter, and follow him. In the distance, I catch the sound of more laughter. It sounds like two men, maybe more. It's hard to tell from this distance.

Hunter moves forward, and we creep to the edge of the woods until the entire scope of the place is in view. The back of a massive three-story wooden lodge with floor-to-ceiling windows and several balconies sits on the edge of the woods. Connected to it is another smaller building, and several wood cabins rest along the edges of the treeline, creating a massive circle. From where we stand, I can make out a huge clear area, large enough for a chopper to land.

It's enormous, like nothing I've ever seen before. It's like a huge luxury resort dropped into the middle of the woods.

In the middle of nowhere.

Where there are no eyes. No ears.

Just wilderness and zero consequences.

Hunter taps my shoulder, grabbing my attention, and uses two fingers to point to his eyes, then to the cabin closest to us. He gestures for me to follow him and then darts toward the back of the building.

Fuck. I really don't want to die today.

I rush forward, sluggish and dizzy from fear and lack of nutrients, and crash next to him.

"We have to find that woman and get out," he whispers. He points to the lodge a few cabins away. "I bet she's in there."

If she's not already dead. I don't say it, but we both know it's unlikely she's still alive.

I nod, tucking the image of that man away, hoping to god she didn't meet the same fate, and glance around the building toward the main lodge. Movement catches my eye. I duck back and hold up my fist, then use the same two-finger gesture to silently convey I saw something or someone move.

Keeping my back plastered to the building, I peer around it. When I see nothing, we dart to the next building, my chest heaving.

A faint sound, one that raises the hair on the back of my neck, slips through the fear pulsing in my head. I blink, slapping my hands over my ears.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Shadowy demons scream through my head. The scent of metal and roses and burning candles fills my nose as the memory tries to take over. Blinking through it, I suck in a breath.

"Fuck man, you okay?" Hunter whispers. "Please don't pass out on me."

I swipe at my brow, my head swimming. "I'm fine."

"You're white as a ghost."

Ghosts. If only they would leave me alone. If only she would stop fucking haunting me. Headmistress Isla and the things she did to me. The sick, depraved things she used to hurt me, the things she made me do to her.

The faint sour taste of her stings my tongue. Sweat and sinful sweetness a little boy should never know.

"Fuck," Hunter whispers, horror lining his tone. "Someone is over there."

My focus snaps back to now, my vision clearing of the purging room, and I pick up on the same faint moaning that sent me back in time to that horrible place.

I'm not there.

I'm here. In *this* nightmare.

Keeping my back pressed to the building, I inch until I'm at the corner and peer round. When there's no movement, I gesture to the next cabin, and we inch out into the open space between the buildings, staying low to the ground until we are in the shadow of the main lodge.

As we move forward, the large clearing comes into view.

And I freeze.

Hunter crashes into my back. I barely move, my feet rooted to the ground, staring at the scene in front of me.

A man kneels in the center, his back to me, completely naked. Red pools on the dull green grass around his knees, glistening like rubies in the bright morning sunlight. A thin, delicate arm rests on the ground a few feet away, detached from its owner. Moist, fresh blood oozing from where it had been sawed off. Large, hairy arms, bloated and purple, covered in flies, lie behind him, along with small delicate feet.

In front of him, a pole juts from the ground, painted a gleaming wet red. My gaze moves up, then stops, resting on red hair, limp and heavy, drenched, like its owner was caught in a rainstorm.

But rain isn't red.

Drip, drip, drip.

A throaty, erotic groan breaks the silence.

"Oh, my fucking god."

I'm faintly aware of Hunter gripping my arm, trying to pull me away. But it's like the grass grew up around my boots, planting me to the earth, forcing me to witness.

The man's black hair shines in the midday sun, rippling purple and blue like a raven's wing, as he moves. Some part of me is aware I know who he is. And even though every part of my mind tries to make sense of what I'm seeing, recode it differently, I know acutely what is happening. What he's doing even before he shifts, kneeling back, his arm jerking up and down rhythmically, stroking.

My stomach heaves.

Hunter’s desperate grasp on my arm finally unfreezes me. A faint click breaks through the noise in my head, and the hard, cold barrel of a gun presses into my temple.

“Go,” a deep voice says, barely above a whisper.

Hunter’s ruthless grip tightens, and my feet finally uproot. He drags me back as the barrel digs into my temple until we’re behind a building.

The gun lowers, and when I face him, I catch the horror written in his features, pulling the dark skin around his eyes tight with fear, right before I lean over and my stomach empties next to his shiny black shoes.

“Get out of here,” he whispers.

I wipe my mouth and stand upright, blinking in the aftermath of what we just saw, until I’m focusing on his brown eyes. My gaze drops to his three-piece suit, and I stupidly wonder if he’s the devil incarnate, because why would anyone wear such an expensive suit out here in this evil place.

My stomach roils again, and I bend over, clutching my middle. The man grabs my shoulder, pulling me upright, then glances behind him toward the clearing. He shoves at my shoulder like he’s trying to get me moving, but then his brows knit and he takes a step back, his gaze locked on me.

“Jesus,” he says, eyes trailing all over my face. With a shaking hand, he swipes at the sweat on his brow. He licks his lips and for a minute I think he may be sick but the man says, “Get the fuck out of here.”

“What is going on?” Hunter hisses. “And who the fuck are you?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he says and turns the gun, holding the grip out to me, and I notice the suppressor. “My knee. Make it clean.”

I don’t think. I act. My fingers wrap around it, and I point, but hesitate.

“Do it and get the fuck out of here before they catch you,” he grates. He grips my cheeks between his fingers. “He won’t kill me if he thinks you overpowered me.”

I meet his gaze, lower the gun and shoot.

The quiet *popping* sound crashes through the din in my head, and suddenly everything is clear.

The man places a hand on the wooden building and turns just enough so that when he leans over and pukes, it doesn’t hit my boots. He takes a deep breath, swipes the back of his hand over his mouth, face twisted in agony, then points to the woods. “Run.”

When we don’t move, he shoves me again.

“*Go*,” he whisper-screams. “Get the fuck out of here before Rune does that to you.”

Hunter grips my arm, and without looking back, we run.

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Chapter 57

Viper

One hour ago, December, Age 32

THE FLOORBOARDS CREAK UNDER my foot, and I wince, glancing over my shoulder to make sure I didn't wake her. When Delilah doesn't move, I open the door and step into the hall. My gaze lands on Breaker leaned against the wall. He cocks his head to the side as I shut the door.

"Is she sleeping?" he asks. He's not showered yet either, dirt smearing along his chest and arms. Even covered in sweat and filth, he's so incredibly sexy that I can't help but reach for him.

"The second her head hit the pillow. We'll give her a few minutes." I press my lips to his chest, inhaling sex and sweat and earth. "I was going to get a change of clothes, then wake her and shower with her."

He makes a sound in his throat, throwing his head back, as my mouth skims the thick line of his throat. His fingers dig into my waist, sliding up to

the dried cum on my chest as my teeth delicately sink into his Adam's apple.

"Maybe I'll join you," he grates. "Continue the birthday celebration."

I step away, brows knitted.

He chuckles and digs his phone from his pocket to show me the screen. I read the date and sure enough, it's December 12th. With everything that's happened, the weeks of stress and chaos, I forgot my own birthday.

"How's that sound old man?" Breaker grins, a slightly wild, unhinged slant to it. He pulls me close, lips skimming over mine. His heated breath fans my face. "Fuck, I can still taste her, smell her on you."

When I back away, I catch the same feral, heated look that still sings in my veins. It's as if we awakened something out there in those woods. A demanding, ancient need to fuck and own. He rakes his fingers into my hair, gripping it at the roots and tugging my hair back to take my mouth, and my hips thrust forward on instinct, that primal clawing rested deep inside me turning sharp and needy.

"Let's—" the sharp slam of the front door cuts off his next few words, and Breaker steps back.

Our eyes connect.

Father's returned.

We both rush to the end of the hall and lean over the banister. Father stands in the foyer, hands on hips, staring down at his feet with his two soldiers by his side. Like he can feel our presence, his head lifts, focus locking on me. When our eyes connect, the air in the entire house shifts. He shakes his head, and the look of disgust painting his features makes my stomach drop.

His frozen gaze moves to Breaker, lingering long enough to let me know that he knows.

Everything.

"You disappoint me, son," Father says, pointing at me. "You're a vile boy. You always have been, and now you've dragged my sweet, youngest son into your sickness."

I grind my teeth, that old shame flooding my chest, coiling so tightly I feel the second it breaks.

Every single moment of my life burns through me like wildfire. Thirty-two years of bowing, bleeding, begging for scraps of his approval.

It’s all meaningless now. The loyalty I’ve choked on, the twisted love he’s force-fed us, the bitter resentment I’ve swallowed down with each “Yes, Father”, all ruptures inside me. Something dark and poisonous drains from my body, leaving me hollow, weightless. Free.

Breaker snarls, moving forward, but I grip his arm to stop him. “Don’t. He’s trying to rile me.”

But it won’t work. I love my brothers. Our girls. What we share isn’t vile or sinful. His opinion doesn’t matter. It never has. I carried it around, let it burn slightly brighter when I discovered he demolished the school and the sisters who allowed my abuse, but it never really mattered.

And it never will again.

Raising a hand, Father swirls his pointer in the air. Unease sticks like a thousand ice picks along my back. 48 glances our way and then steps to the door. He opens it and a man dressed in an all-black uniform, rifle in hand, steps inside. Then another.

And another.

They continue filing in, boots thudding in unison, rifles at the ready, suppressors attached to quiet their invasion. Soldier after soldier enters the house like a silent, deadly shadow. And with each new soldier filling the foyer, lining up in a neat line along the wall, that worry eating my gut slowly turns to ice.

A million thoughts race through my head: *Get her, find a weapon, we can overtake them*, but the more soldiers that file in, the thoughts die, my fear darkening, and turning sour in my stomach.

“Who are they?” I whisper, scanning the rows of soldiers, trying to sort through my memories. Father never mentioned another school. Both of the ones he ran have been closed for years, and it’s obvious these men aren’t like us. Not even like Father’s new soldiers. They aren’t as rigid. Each one a tad sloppy in their movements as if they didn’t receive proper training. But it doesn’t take a genius to see that where they lack in precision, they make up in sheer number.

Breaker takes a step back, toward Delilah’s room behind us, the same moment I do.

“Move an inch and I’ll kill her,” Fallon barks. “The Julian girl too.”

We both freeze. Breaker’s hand finds my forearm.

“You wouldn’t,” he says, betrayal lining every word.

He would. Father will use any tool, sink to any depth to control us. To weaken us. Breaker knows it, but he's always wanted so desperately for Father to be different. We all have. Refusing to see him for what he is.

But I see him clearly now.

"He will," I whisper, then clear my throat and say to Father, "Why all the fuss?" I motion to the soldiers below. "You picking up random men off the streets now? These guys are sloppy."

"These men are paid to listen," he barks. "Unlike my sons, who can't take a simple order."

"These men lack discipline," I retort. "Obviously untrained." I grip the railing, leaning over next to Breaker. "I'm disappointed in you, Father."

"Cash buys loyalty quicker than discipline ever could," Fallon says. "My sons are evidence of what happens when you coddle a boy instead of forging him into a man."

My laugh has his shoulders stiffening.

"I gave you everything—wealth, a solid foundation, my fucking affection—and you repay me by defying me." Fallon turns to the soldier closest to him standing in the doorway. "Retrieve them."

More soldiers flood the foyer and march toward the stairs. I step back, heart hammering against my ribs. Every instinct screams to get to her, but Father's voice slices through the air, and my body freezes in that old familiar way. My muscles remember the lessons. The cutting belt, the nights without food, the cold and blood. One command from him and years of conditioning take over, no matter how much I hate myself for it.

My chest tightens. We've pushed him to this. Refusing to listen to him. Disobeying every order. Jeopardizing the mission he painstakingly planned by taking Cora, refusing to hand her over until he marched in and stole her back.

Falling in love with our target.

"You're to return at once," he says, the order smacking me as harsh as leather to flesh. "Both of you will ensure the contract is finalized and get into that lodge. If you fail, I'll send my soldiers to remove Rune."

My stomach knots, and Breaker and I exchange a look. "That would ruin our chances of—"

"Silence!" he screams, and my insides freeze. "I have allowed this to go on long enough. Indulging in Reaper's fantastical wish has cost me money, resources, and time I can never recover."

Breaker grips the banister and leans forward, every muscle rigid with rage. “That fantastical wish is Reaper trying to get back—”

“My son is *dead*,” Fallon growls. “He died the day Rune took him from me.”

“Your son is—” The words cut off as a soldier marches toward Breaker.

White-hot fury explodes behind my eyes. I unsheathe my blade in one fluid motion, shoving Breaker backward with my left arm while my right slashes forward. One soldier jumps away, but my boot connects with his shin. He buckles, but the one behind him aims and shoots. A rifle fires with a quiet pop. The bullet buzzes past my ear. I duck, spin, slash. Blood sprays across my face, warm and metallic. I pivot toward the next target when cold steel presses against my skull, freezing me mid-strike. My fingers loosen on the knife, and it hits the hardwood with a hollow clatter that echoes through the suddenly silent hallway.

“I said restrain them, not fucking shoot them!” Fallon’s scream echoes around the house. Fear licks at the back of my mind, dulling the searing heat raging through me, terrified he just woke Delilah and she’ll come out here.

“We won’t fight,” I say, loud enough that Father can hear. I meet Breaker’s eyes. “We *won’t* fight at all.”

His jaw pops, but he knows, just like me, the threat is too great. Delilah is feet away, vulnerable. I have no idea where Striker and Reaper are. Not that it matters. We’re outnumbered.

By a fucking lot.

“Remember the plan,” I tell him quietly. “We do this. Then…”

We take our girls. We leave this all behind.

Breaker gives me a slight nod. The soldiers lower their weapons, then grab my wrists, wrenching my arms behind my back and bind them. Beside me, Breaker grunts as his body hits the floor. Another soldier secures his hands. They haul us both to our feet, pain lancing through my shoulders as I get my footing.

Fallon says something to 48, and he once again looks my way, then heads up the stairs, a line of soldiers trailing behind him.

“You’re going to regret this,” I whisper to him, malice twisting around every word as he brushes past me. “Reaper is going to fucking kill you the second he gets the chance.”

He stumbles for a moment, then keeps walking. Breaker twists his neck, watching them climb to the fourth floor until a gun barrel jabs between his shoulder blades, forcing him ahead.

“Move,” the man grates, and lifts his chin toward the stairs. “Downstairs.”

I grind my teeth, my fingers itching to snatch up my knife and plunge it into the bastard’s jugular and watch him bleed out. But with a deep breath, I bury the urge to fight, and silently beg Breaker to listen and not make any sudden movements. When my boots hit the bottom step, muffled *pops* crack from above. My pulse explodes, but then Striker’s snarl and Reaper’s raw howl tear through the air.

He’s ordered them not to kill us, I remind myself. Fallon is just here to assert his control.

The fourth floor erupts with curses and snarls. Boots thud. A sickening crack echoes down the stairwell before Striker’s bloodied face appears, hands bound, his entire body jerking against the soldiers’ grip like a rabid animal, as they drag him down the flights of stairs and shove him to the floor at my feet. He rests his head on the wood floor, breathing deeply.

“You’re going to fucking regret this,” he snarls.

“Threats? Again?” Father says.

Minutes crawl by before three men emerge, struggling to contain a bound Reaper. They slam him into the banister, and his feral growls stop briefly, but he continues to fight them, all teeth and snarls as they drag him to the foyer. As they shove him to his knees, his eyes lock on mine, nothing but black pools, promising violence. Blood paints his face, dripping from his nose onto the wood floor.

“Who are they?” he asks me, but his eyes drag along Breaker then Striker, like he’s checking for injuries, then scan the rows of soldiers at my back. “How many?”

His question surprises me, but I swallow down the shock. If Reaper doesn’t know about these men, we’re fucked. “No clue who they are. And if I’m to guess a number? It’s too many.”

Reaper’s teeth grind, swallowing my answer like it’s glass. Striker’s pulled upright, so he’s kneeling. He winces as the barrel of a rifle presses to his cheek. A growl slips from my lips, my body tensing, the need to protect nearly making me shoot forward, but Reaper says, “No,” and I shove all my instincts down until I’m drowning in rage.

“Take them outside,” Fallon says, gesturing to me and Breaker. A hand clasps over my shoulder, and I’m shoved forward.

Reaper’s dark, deadly growl pricks along my arms. Everyone stops moving, and I meet his eyes. “Protect our Baby Girl,” he grates. “And I swear to god, if you let anything happen to her, I’ll kill you myself.”

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Chapter 58

Striker

THE RULES WE ABIDE by keep us separate from the animals. They keep us from slipping down that dark path that calls to us, beckoning us forward to embrace the parts of ourselves we keep hidden. The damaged, broken bits we cover up with a mask to appear normal. Yet underneath it all, that baser instinct lives.

Humans are still animals after all.

And some of us are born in darkness.

I was forged in it, raised by it, trained to wield it like a weapon. And that dark, primitive energy sears through my veins as I tug at the metal cuffs digging into my wrists. They clank against the concrete floor, the sound grating across my brain like nails.

Every instinct in me screams. *Find her.* But I'm chained like a prisoner, hands bound in shackles looped through a ring buried in the floor.

I *am* a prisoner. By Father. By my own thoughts and blind trust.

My gaze narrows in on 48 standing a few feet away, his gun trained on me. "Unlock these and I won't snap your fucking neck." I grit my teeth, my voice deadly calm. "You know damn well it's going to end badly for you if you keep following his commands."

His eyes dart to the soldier beside him. One I've never seen before.

One of the fifty—sixty?—who stormed the estate. Soldiers I've never seen until today. They have no identifying numbers. No names.

I have no idea who this man is.

The school was closed years ago. Or so we thought.

I lick my split lip, amusement bubbling in my chest. They may have overpowered us, dragged Reaper and me down here to the basement and chained us like dogs, but they have no idea what we're capable of doing when one of ours is threatened.

And our girl is up there.

Alone.

"If Reaper doesn't saw your fucking head off, I will," I snarl, my vision blurring, stained red at the corners. I press my eyes closed, forcing out the images trying to gather in my head.

Delilah, terrified. Screaming. Being hurt, or worse, by these men we didn't even know existed.

Father has a vast army of mercenaries he trained in the school, but the amount of new soldiers that invaded our home like a fucking parasite, goes beyond our knowledge.

"Shut the fuck up, bitch," the new soldiers says. He slides forward and spits. Saliva lands on my cheek. "I heard you like sucking your brother's dick." He grabs his crotch tauntingly. "Maybe if you're sweet, I'll let you suck mine." He steps up close, close enough. "Or maybe I'll fuck you raw while you watch as that little black-haired beauty of yours chokes on every cock in this place."

A laugh tingles in my throat as a smile splits my lips. "God, you're so fucking *fucked*." I jerk my head downward, and my forehead connects with his nose. The crunching sound and his garbled grunt as he stumbles backward, curls satisfaction in my gut. Air whooshes from my lungs as the butt of a rifle hits my stomach. I bend forward, the chains on my wrists clanking as I double over. My laughter spills out, choked but filled with menace. "I'm going to fucking kill you."

"Quiet," 48 warns, rearing back the rifle, threatening to hit me again. "Keep yapping, and you'll regret it."

I smirk, bringing my cuffed hands to my face, swiping away the wet spit, my gaze locked on the nameless sack of shit before me. This soldier, this sorry excuse for a man, will be the first to die.

He backs away, the arrogant expression on his face slipping, like he can see my plan. How I'll kick his face in until matter and blood cover every inch of my boot.

Outside the door, the quiet, *pop pop pop*, of a gun echoes through the large room. 48 meets my eye.

“Told you.” I chuckle. “You’re *fucked*.”

The lock slides and the door flies open. Reaper stalks in, blood splattered across his face and neck. Purple already colors under his eyes from where he's been hit, his lip swollen, but he looks otherwise in tact. He points the gun at the new soldier and fires. Warmth hits my face, and glee spreads in my chest. He trains the rifle on 48, chin lifting in my direction. “Unlock him.”

48’s jaw tics. Slowly, he lowers his weapon, then unclips the keys hooked on his belt. He inches toward me and unlocks the cuffs, eyes fixed on Reaper. Before I can lunge, Reaper shoots. 48 stumbles back, and another bullet hits his forehead, then he collapses at my feet.

“Are you good?” Reaper’s hand lands on my shoulder, grounding me. I suck in air, letting it fill my lungs as I gather up all my rage and pull it in tightly, keeping it restrained.

“Yeah,” I say, then grab 48’s gun. “Where is she?”

Reaper glances over his shoulder to the open door. “Don’t know.”

In the hallway, three soldiers lie in heaps on the floor, blood smearing the walls behind them. 55 kneels at the foot of the stairs leading to the kitchen, hands clasped behind his head.

“Don’t shoot him,” Reaper says as I raise my rifle. “He’s the one who unlocked my cuffs.”

I glance at Reaper, then move forward, taking the stairs two at a time. When we reach the top step, we’re met with an eerie silence. I lock eyes with Reaper. He senses it too. The dead stillness. The missing piece. My jaw clenches as I surge forward, and sprint through the house, my heart slamming against my ribs.

The hallway to her room stretches impossibly long as I storm toward Delilah’s room, Reaper a half-step behind me.

I *know*, even before I open her bedroom door.

It slams against the wall as I burst through, my eyes landing on her empty, messy bed. For a second, the world narrows to just the sound of my breathing and the echoing silence.

Fallon’s taken her.

Sent her back.

The thought wrings me out. Strips every bullshit veneer away.

I stumble backward, my vision blurring, barely seeing through the dark tunnel of my own fucking stupidity. How could we let this happen? I let my guard down. We all did. Let need and hunger and greed drive us, just as we let the mission take over all humanity for far too long.

It was always the mission. Secure, extract, train. Every fucking time I, *we*, chose his orders over the suffocating need to just hold her and keep her safe, we failed her. We thought we could manipulate our father by feeding his ego like we've always done. But now Delilah is gone.

Sent back to Rune.

Exactly like we fucking planned.

A low growl from Reaper beside me, then he's in motion, his grating voice echoing down the hallway, screaming for Fallon. I stomp through the house behind him, rage pulsing in my veins. The closer we get to the west wing, the closer I am to losing control. When we reach the study, Reaper slams the door open so hard the sound cracks through the room.

Fallon doesn't even blink as we stalk toward him, standing in front of the dark, empty fireplace like he had been waiting.

"Where the fuck is she?" I growl, dread eating my gut, making it churn.

"Gone," Fallon says. "Now we pray she's capable of completing her task."

"He's going to kill her," I snarl. My fingers flex on the rifle, itching to end him. I set it down, not trusting myself to maintain control.

"If that's her fate, then so be it," Father says. "You knew the risks when we decided to do this."

"That was before—" I slam my mouth shut.

Before she was ours. Before she was something we were scared to lose.

Reaper marches forward, and grabs Father by his collar. "She wasn't ready."

"She was never going to be ready," Fallon snaps, attempting to shove Reaper back. "That girl was a tool. You are the one who let these useless emotions play into this."

I laugh bitterly.

"You are to blame for this mess," Fallon says, pointing at Reaper's face. "You made the mistake of falling in love with your target. Of falling for the woman who destroyed our lives."

“Your greed destroyed us,” I seethe.

Fallon rips Reaper’s hand off him, glaring at me. “That fucking woman has cost me enough.”

Reaper taps his chest, leaning in so close to Fallon’s face our father takes a step back. “If she dies, her blood is on your hands.”

“Her blood has been on your hands for fifteen years!” Father shouts. “That’s the cost of being marked by the devil.”

Reaper shakes his head. “No Father. That’s the cost of being your son. And you have cost me *everything*.”

I close the gap between us, my hands trembling with the effort to hold back the storm brewing inside me. “That woman is the only good thing I’ve ever touched. You better pray to any god who will listen that she’s alive.”

“Or what, my *syn*?”

“Or I’m going to personally send you to hell.”

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Chapter 59

Reaper

October 31st, Halloween Night, Age 35

WHEN ALL THAT'S LEFT is vengeance, you become addicted to it.

The compulsion consumes you. It's a poison that leaks into your soul, staining everything. Your life, your intentions. Revenge becomes you. It's all you eat and drink until you're bloated and weighed down by the heaviness of the need to destroy.

I've been haunted by Rune Gavin for far too long. He's a cancer who's plagued me. A constant background noise that's deafening. But it's only been in the last five years that I've wanted to kill him.

Kill. That's too easy. Too quick.

I want to eviscerate him. Flay him alive the way he did my brother.

Not too far from here, Rune sits smug in the knowledge he wrecked my life. He thinks he's won.

My gaze lingers on the large windows framing downtown, wondering if Rune caught wind of their plans tonight.

I doubt it.

That tiny little redhead, with a smile bright enough to make my heart stop, has mastered the art of sneaking around.

“You have this under control?” Father asks, his tinny voice cracking through the speakers.

The sound grates over my skin, and I tap the volume button on the keyboard to lower it, wishing I could end this call already, but he insisted on reviewing the mission before tomorrow.

Anal retentive bastard that he is.

Through the video feed, I watch as Father taps a shiny black pen on his desk, the smacking sound cutting through my head like dull glass. “The target has a meeting in the morning with Rune. The Julian girl will be with her as usual, which could be problematic.”

I lock my eyes with his through the video feed. They’re such a pale wintery blue that even via video, the icy coldness in them chills my blood. Surrounded by wood paneling, ornate 18th-century furniture, and velvet drapes that frame the window behind him, he is a picture of obscene wealth. A true oligarch with more power and money than most small countries. Not even Rune knows the vastness of the Byrns’ name.

Yet here we are, his four sons, currently living in a refurbished factory, never having a place to call home. Not since we left that fucking concrete hell years ago. If the school could be called a home.

It was a literal prison.

One we remain locked in. Even with the bars removed, the sense of freedom—that we can go anywhere, do anything —is just smoke and shadows. We’re still chained to Fallon.

We will be as long as Rune breathes.

“I have it under control, Father. No need to fret.”

His brows dip in response to my agitated tone. “I can trust you to extract the target tomorrow?”

My gaze immediately moves from the computer screen to the wall of images and other intel we’ve collected over the years and lands on the picture of her. The single snapshot I took the day I saw her in the park four years ago.

It had been the first time I’d laid eyes on her in a long, long time.

She was nothing like I remembered.

And I fucking despise her for it.

Resent her for this deep, dark thing that breathes under my skin, begging to be let out. It's sick. The bone-deep need to touch her, smell her, surges through me so intensely at times, it should scare me, but I think part of me wants to let it free.

Let myself consume her as a punishment for breeding this grotesque thing inside me.

This obsession to own every minute of her existence.

Stain her with every vile and dark thing inside me. Fuck her. Taste her. Ruin her pure innocence the way she's ruined me.

"You know I have everything under control, Father." Except my damn thoughts. My eyes drag along the countless pictures we've taken of the girls, the printout of their work schedules, and the sticky notes pinned to the board listing their favorite restaurants, movies, and books.

Four years is a long time to watch someone. To collect information.

Four years is so long that it's fucked us all in the head. Especially when it became clearer and clearer with each passing month, with each additional detail, Rune's two daughters lived in utter ignorance of the evil surrounding them.

Well. At least one of them is naïve to the truth. I have a feeling Cora Julian is well acquainted with the sick shit Rune is capable of, though I have no evidence. Just a hunch. This twisted needling feeling in my gut whenever I see him with her.

She's too much like us.

Hard. Even though she covers it up with a candy-coated exterior, Cora is brutally damaged inside.

Pain and fear will do that to a person. Leave them covering up scars with bubbly personalities and laughter. I'm all too aware of what having a nightmare for a parent can do to a child's psyche. And Caroline was a terrible parent. Which says a lot considering my father is Fallon Byrns.

"Reaper," he says, his voice sharper, angry at my dismissiveness.

"Yes, I'm paying attention, oh Father dearest." I lean back, crossing my fingers behind my head and propping my ankle on my knee, schooling my features into the same hard mask as his. "I don't need to remind you I was the one who planned this, so I'm sure I can execute it without your endless chatter in the background."

The video distorts, but I catch his glare before it ripples and cuts away, pulling him apart into tiny little pixels.

“Oh dear,” I say, leaning further back in my chair. “You’re breaking up. We should end the call.”

The video distorts again then snaps clear. My father’s stern face appears in high definition. He’s aged well. While his black hair has turned completely white, his high cheekbones and strong jaw remain sharp as a blade. The fact that I look almost exactly like him breeds the self-hatred festering inside me.

The idea that I have any bit of Fallon in me makes my skin crawl.

“—and I know you’ll follow the plan we’ve agreed upon,” he’s saying. “The girl needs to be trained before we can trust her with—”

“I said I have it handled,” I snap, interrupting his tirade. “We’ve been over this a thousand times. We will be waiting in the van outside. Clyde will notify us when they are in the lobby. If we can take out Zane, we will immediately, and in the event of—”

“There is zero room for mistakes,” Father cuts in. “You go in, remove any obstacle, take the girl, and make sure Rune stays alive.”

“Rodger that, yes, sir, and all that bullshit,” I say. Reaching for the keyboard, I drag it closer, ready to end the video call, but my father says, “One last thing,” and I can’t help the heavy sigh that leaves my lungs.

Behind him, Mr. Carrington enters the room, carrying a black leather case. My father turns slightly and waves him away, but Carrington leans over and whispers something in his ear. Father shakes his head and takes the leather case as Carrington catches my face in the video feed, shooting me a wink and a grin, and my irritation melts.

I’ve always liked my father’s assistant. Whenever we visited the States, he would be the one to pick us up from the airfield, then escort us by chopper to our Father’s home along the east coast. He calls himself a butler, which elicits an irritated sigh from Father, but I think Fallon secretly enjoys his eccentric personality.

He has to. He’s been with him long before I was born.

“Clyde sent new intel,” Father says, shooing Carrington away. He disappears from the screen as Father pulls a thick red file from the case and holds it up for me to see clearly. Then, he pulls a small drive out of the case. “He hacked the USB Rune has locked in his desk.”

My heart does an odd flip. Clyde has been trying for years to gather evidence, risking his life to feed us information on Rune's sick activities. And fuck, they are depraved.

The first image he smuggled out of the hunt sent a wave of horror over me that drowned any hope my father's old friend held on to a fragment of who he was before. While we knew Rune was hunting people, seeing the images of what he did stays in my nightmares.

Then, months later, came the ledgers. The list of names and the notes. The evidence that Rune killed all members, whether it be because they defied some code or wanted out, we're still unsure. Though the details are scarce, the one thing that was evident was that Rune developed a twisted system that kept members deeply intertwined in his hunts.

Ever since that first time Rune hunted Caroline and Drake Julian, his best friends, Clyde is hesitant to step foot on lodge grounds. If he does, it's only to keep Rune from being suspicious, and he remains in the lodge, never taking part, so gathering evidence is hard.

Viper refuses to talk about what he saw that day so many years ago. Hunter told me bits, and what he witnessed changed him. My brother was never the same after that.

"He made a copy?" I ask. "Send the file over."

I wait while he plugs in the USB and sends the file. The secure drive chimes a minute later, indicating the zip-file transferred. I click download, and settle back in my seat to wait while it downloads. I'm not even going to pretend to know how Breaker keeps our devices secure, but I'm glad he does. Because I have a feeling that what I'm about to open would make what hackers find on the dark web look tame.

"Tell me what the file contains once you view it," Father says, glancing at the stacks files. He pulls a face, then returns the stack to the folder and leans back in his seat.

When the file downloads, I reach for the mouse to open the file, but hesitate.

My throat tightens, my eyes fixing on the black ink skull on my finger. The one with the red slash over it. A tremor runs through my hand, and I curl my fingers into a fist, dropping my hand to my lap.

I have no idea what I'm going to see when I view the files Rune's kept locked away all these years. There could be images, video footage of what Rune does to his victims. What he did to my brother.

Hunter could be on there.

I take a deep breath to clear my head. “The file’s corrupted,” I say, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension in them. “I’ll try again later.”

Father nods slightly, more than likely knowing I’m lying. If he’s too cowardly to view it, how does he expect me to? Rune didn’t just kill Fallon’s son. He tortured him. Sent body parts to us. He ripped my brother apart, and in turn, ripped me apart.

No, Rune didn’t just kill my brother; he destroyed part of me.

He decimated my other half.

And he knew it. That was his intention.

And five years later, I’m finally going to pay him back.

“We will make him pay, son.” Father’s words rip through my thoughts and for once, I’m grateful to hear his voice. Hear the softer tone. The pain that lines each word reminds me that the man who reared me really did love us.

Does.

He does. Present tense.

My father loves us enough to take four years meticulously planning revenge on the man who murdered his son.

“Get the girl. Take her to the estate. Break her down. I’ll meet you there in a few days to assist in her—”

“No,” I say, cutting him off, my stomach souring at the thought of him anywhere near her. She’s too delicate to be touched by him. To be touched by me, even though that’s all I want to do. Touch and take and fuck that pretty little kitten until she belongs to me.

To all of us.

I know my brothers feel the same, hot need that I do. Breaker is so in love with Cora, with them both, I know the mission will never go according to plan. We’re in too deep. Viper talks incessantly about them, and between the two of them, they have every detail of their lives memorized. Striker is better at keeping himself in check, but I’ve seen the way he looks at the girls.

Hungry.

Starved for everything we never had.

“You know this is the only way,” Father says. “We will use Rune’s daughter to destroy him.”

Blood for blood.

I kick away from the row of monitors and roll my chair across the room, plucking an image of the girls off the wall. My heart does that damn flip thing again. The one that tells me I’m just as fucked as my brothers, if not more so.

They are so sweet. So vibrant.

Delilah is just a victim of Rune. The thought of her light dimming, training her as brutally as we’ve been trained, twists a knife in my chest. It’s what we planned, what I spent years planning. Take her and whittle her down with zero remorse. Rip her to shreds and then form a whole new person who will crave my every command like it’s the purest, sweetest air.

Then I saw her.

Remembered her.

And I know, as much as I want to remove every fragment of Rune from this earth, I can’t destroy something so purely innocent.

Not the way Father wants me to.

My eyes slide to the picture of Delilah again. Raven black hair, a delicate body that would crumble under harsh hands. God, I would love to watch her break apart beneath me. Deconstruct her slowly, have my mouth take her apart piece by piece until she cracks open and releases all the beautiful brightness within. Then I’d lick it up, and own it.

Own her.

Own both of them.

I run my tongue over the scars on my lip, two perfect lines branded into my flesh. There are a handful of days I’ve lived through that I wish I hadn’t. The day my mother died. The day my brother died. But the day I set off on my first mission lives forever as one of the most brutal moments I’ve ever endured.

Rolling back to the desk, I snatch up the photo. My thumb skims over the picture, letting the memory of that one day in the park, that single good moment, flood my system. Let myself remember the way she looked, and how I dreamed of her for weeks afterward. How brightly she smiled, surrounded by thousands of tiny lights, and how it lit up something inside me.

Imagining her going through the hell we endured tarnishes the brilliance she embedded in me that day.

I shake my head and set the picture aside.

“I have another idea,” I say, bracing my hands on the table. I meet my father’s eyes. “Do you trust me?”

Father cocks his head to the side. I hate it when he gets that look. It reminds me of Hunter. Calculating, assessing me. Seeing if I stack up and am worthy of his time.

Hunter would always give me that look and usually find me lacking.

I don’t know how. What he felt was missing from me would have been missing from him too.

We shared the exact same DNA.

“I trust you to complete this mission,” Father says carefully. I swear he knows what I’m thinking. Like he can read my mind and every vile thing that’s running through it. “How you go about it, I’ll leave up to you. As long as the girl is compliant, trained, and trustworthy by the time you’re done with her. Take her, do with her as you please, just make sure she’s ready.”

“She will be.”

I’m going to make damn sure she is.

Some call it manipulation. I call it improvising.

“Carrington,” I say, shifting my gaze to my father’s assistant as he steps back into my view. “I need you to arrange delivery of a few things to the estate by tonight.”

“Like?” Father asks.

“Things wom— a woman needs.” Fuck, I almost said women.

“Send me a list, and it will be done.” With a curt nod, and a wink, Carrington leaves, shutting the door behind him.

“Reaper,” Father says, his voice a clear warning, “don’t lose sight of the goal.”

I huff out a bitter laugh. “No need to worry. Rune will go down even if it means I strap C-4 to my chest and walk into his lodge, a ticking bomb.”

His face turns hard.

“Which I won’t,” I say. “Who else would test you as much as your favorite *syn*?”

He purses his lips and leans forward. “One last thing,” he says. “Remember our agreement.”

My stomach drops.

The agreement. The one I never actually agreed to.

He must see my expression because he bolts from his seat, slapping his palm down on the desk. “He killed my son! My flesh and blood.”

My insides twist up. “And mine.”

“She is of his blood. She must die,” he grates. “You get her trained and into that lodge, then into that room. And when you’re done with her, you fucking kill the last living, breathing piece of Rune.”

Eye for an Eye. Blood for blood.

My father will not rest until every shred of Rune is destroyed.

None of this is about saving lives. Or even stopping the hunts. Father wants blood, wants everyone who took part, every person associated with Hunter’s death, removed from this plane.

“You complete this mission, then slit the girl’s throat for all I care, but I want her body delivered to me when you’re done.”

“Understood,” I say, my stomach sinking.

“Get it done,” he snaps, and the feed goes dark.

I switch the screen off, and my eyes slide to the picture again.

Kill her.

Yeah, that’s not going to happen. I’m going to do something far worse.

Revenge hammers at my head, scorches my veins, but something far more toxic planted a vibrant little seed inside me years ago, and it has grown over the years. It took root, and now its vines stick to my ribcage, and I can’t get her out.

She’s going to be mine, even if it takes me forever to convince her.

What’s worse than killing Rune?

Taking his daughter and turning her against him.

What’s worse than defying my father?

Falling in love with the enemy’s daughter.

Keeping her alive. Keeping her safe.

Keeping her for myself.

The woman whose life I destroyed.

I lean back in the chair, sucking in air, my heart skipping.

She’s going to be mine.

Ours.

They both are.

Cora Julian just doesn’t know it yet.

No one does.

I stalk across the room, my boots thudding as I descend the stairs. When I reach the first floor, my brothers all glance my way. “Who feels like going to a costume party?”

Viper quirks a brow. Breaker tosses the video game controller onto the coffee table, glancing from me to Viper.

Striker groans. “Bad idea, Reap,” he says. “You know damn well they are going to that costume party at Rune’s club tonight.”

“But we are set to acquire the target tomorrow,” Breaker says. “That’s the plan.”

“We aren’t changing the plan,” I say, my blood singing from just the thought of being near her. “Tomorrow is still a go.”

Viper narrows his eyes. “Then what are you suggesting?”

I shrug, a smirk curling my lip. “Suit up. I know of a sexy little Vixen and a pretty little Kitten who might want to play.”

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Chapter 60

Delilah

WHEN THE WORLD COMES back around, it's nothing but a whirling, blurry gray and splitting pain. I attempt to open my eyes, but they fall closed again, too heavy to lift. When I try to move, a hot stab, like a fire poker through my brain, shoots through my skull, and nausea ripples in my belly. More stinging fire ignites in my wrists as I shift, and everything floods back to me, hitting me like a tidal wave.

My limbs tingle, my palms sweat as I try to lift a hand to rub my eyes, but I can't seem to signal my brain because it will not move. It feels like concrete scrapes against my eyeballs, and I try to rub them again, and the sharp sting of something grates into my wrist. I blink several more times, fighting the urge to puke as my vision centers on a solid gray wall. Beneath me, I sense a hard surface, sense I'm sitting….

Upright? In a chair?

Pain twinges in my neck as my head lolls to the side. My mouth unglues, and I smack my lips. After a few more seconds of fighting the remnants of the drug Fallon gave me, everything around me finally comes into focus.

Sluggishly, I blink, focusing on the concrete floor. Rust stains gather around a drain a few feet away. My gaze drops to my lap. My bare legs, spread open, a wooden chair visible beneath me.

My gaze drags to my arms.

Bound with rope to the arm of a chair.

Panic lands in the center of my chest like a hot coal. I jerk violently, and everything snaps into clarity. My head jerks, but I see nothing but gray walls veiled in shadows and a concrete floor. I try to shift my legs, but they don't move, and the pain of the rope at my ankles cuts into my flesh. A dark, trembling awareness floods my limbs, like a dam breaking open. It pours over me, and a choked sob breaks through the deafening quiet.

Scanning the space, I take in each detail. I'm in a warehouse of some sort, tied to a fucking chair, wearing nothing but Striker's shirt. I wiggle, but my legs are splayed open, leaving me even more vulnerable than I've ever felt before.

I swallow, nausea nearly taking my breath away, and try to breathe through the terror eating at my brain like a parasite.

He'll test you, Delilah. Rune will want to make sure you've not been compromised.

"Where am I?" I whisper, trying to keep control.

Knowing my father, he's somewhere watching me. Waiting for me to wake up. Maybe even see how I'll react. Before I can sink into the horror of my situation, a faint buzz, like a door far away has unlocked, and then the *tap tap tap* of shoes echoes behind me. I sense someone behind me. A minute later, a familiar face comes into view.

"Dr. Morgan?" I ask, but my blood drains from my head, and I tilt sideways when Zane steps into my line of sight.

"When you return, your first instinct will be to shrink away in fear. Do not show fear. Rune can smell it like a rabid dog. Fallon's words fill my head. *You have not seen your father in weeks. What would Delilah do?"*

Except we never planned for, never expected, Zane to be the one to greet me.

I take in his suit and tie. The sling and cast on his arm. The slick, cruel glee, darkening his eyes.

"Zane?" I whisper, slapped into a state of total fear as every moment from the last few weeks hits me from all directions. I glance around. "Where am I?"

"Here," he says, cold eyes locked on me. They slip lower to the space between my legs.

"Why am I here?" I ask. "Why am I tied up, and where is Cor—"

Behind me, the door buzzes. The skin on the back of my neck pricks. Zane keeps his eyes on me, watching my reaction. Then I feel him. His

presence fills the room, almost tangible in its darkness. Footsteps—heavy, deliberate, slow—scrape the floor behind me. Goosebumps break out on my skin. He moves in slowly behind me and stands there.

"He may try to intimidate you. Don't show fear. Fear means guilt."

The tips of his fingers skim along the top of my head. "You're home."

Tears burst free as terror floods my bloodstream. I choke on a sob.

Images of Cora over the years with him—every single moment I missed because I refused to see it—and the pictures of mutilated bodies fill my head, swirling fast enough that I have to clench my teeth, breathing out slowly through my nose so I don't pass out.

My pulse skyrockets, aware that Zane is watching me, and let the word come out as if I'm ignorant of every horrendous sin, "Daddy?"

Rune circles, coming to a stop a foot in front of me. My father looks exactly as he always does. Pressed suit, salt and pepper hair, vibrant blue eyes, but the subtle changes are there. The dark circles under his eyes. The stubble along his jaw.

But now that I know, I can see it. The underlying layer of something not quite right. Some thin veil that shrouds him, a dark, shadowy thing, turning everything about him slightly off.

A tremble starts in my shoulders, from his nearness, but he takes a step back and then gestures to Morgan.

Dr. Morgan clears his throat, and that's when I notice the file in his hands. He opens it. "The reports show semen from four separate males was present in the vaginal cavity."

My chest caves in as the air leaves my lungs. "You examined me?"

Morgan shifts his focus from the file to me, then he says. "Further vaginal examination reveals no vaginal tearing, so it is unclear if there was an assault or if the subject was willing. There was no evidence of semen in the anus, so it appears the patient was not sodomized."

My chin quivers, and I look at Zane, whose cold, penetrating stare makes my skin prick.

Dr. Morgan continues, "Examination of the arms and wrists shows no signs of restraint. Faint bruising along the neck indicates choking, or possible restraint. Bite marks along the body and the old bruising on her face, along with the healed cut on the mouth, all indicate physical assault. The birth control implant remains, so it appears the intent was not to

impregnate. Bloodwork and cultures all came back clear. Negative for STDs and pregnancy."

"How fucking *dare* you," I breathe, heat rising in my chest and face.

Rune moves so fast that I don't have time to brace for the hit. Pain explodes across my mouth, and my head snaps back.

"He will be angry. Try to deflect."

I squeeze my eyes shut, my mouth and cheek stinging, blood and acidic hatred flooding my tongue.

"The eyes are the windows to the soul. He will see your anger. The distaste. He will see your hatred. If he suspects you are anything other than a victim of his war, he will never trust you again."

I will my shoulders to drop. Let my head droop. My hands shake, but it's from rage, and I let the tears building behind my eyes fall. The pain searing through me is real. So *very* real.

"So you spent a month fucking them?" Rune's cold voice cuts through the room. "Is my daughter his whore now?"

I shake my head, running my tongue over my lip. Blood oozes from my nose to my mouth. It drips and hits my knee. I focus on the red as it slides over my thigh.

"You fucked them in my club!" His scream tears through the room. I shrink back, more tears falling, slipping down my chin and neck. "You embarrassed my name by forgetting who you are."

"Convince him that you haven't changed. Remember, you are Delilah Gavin, but you are also traumatized and angry."

"I didn't know," I cry, shaking my head, then look up at him, letting him see some anger. "I just wanted a moment in my life that you didn't control."

He raises his hand again, and I wince. When the hit doesn't come, I stay motionless, waiting for his next move. Rune turns to Morgan and dismisses him. He rushes away, and a minute later the door behind me buzzes and then clicks closed. Zane takes a step back, letting his shoes slide over the concrete floor. The sound grates through my head, and a needling sensation stabs at my fingertips, and I grip the armrest.

"Delilah." My father's finger hooks under my chin. He raises my head to meet my eyes. "Tell me his name."

My brows knit. My heart thrashes like a wild beast.

My father is an intelligent man. You don't achieve the level of power that he has, amass this much wealth, by being a fool. Every single thing Fallon and I went over, day after day, courses through my mind, but I come up blank.

"Who?" I ask, my voice shaking. I search his eyes and for a second he looks like my father again. "Who? Those men?"

"The big one," he says gently. "The one who was in charge."

Reaper.

"I don't know," I say. "They called each other by code names."

He nods, encouraging me to continue. When he runs his finger over his bottom lip, pain sears through me, and that desperation for my old life steals my breath.

"When he asks for their names. You tell him."

"The one in charge was Reaper," I whisper.

Rune's face changes, turns cold, and a smile that I've never seen before cuts across his face. "That's right. That's him. That's what he is. The harbinger of death."

He backs away, and motions for Zane to come forward.

"Why am I in here?" I ask, my insides shivering with alarm. "Where are we? Why am I not at home?"

"Zane has a few questions for you," Rune says, backing away. "You can go home once we have some answers."

Rune turns and walks behind me. I hear the buzz and the door shuts, and then the reality that I'm alone with Zane slams into me. The man who's tried to convince Rune to let him have me for years. The man so desperate to get his hands on me, he practically begged me for dates.

Begged to have some part of me for himself.

And now I'm strapped to a chair and left alone with him.

The same man who hunts people with Rune.

My heart slams, nearly cracking my ribcage.

Zane crouches in front of me. He raises the arm in the sling. "Did you know they were going to do this?"

I lick my lips. "Those men?"

He smiles, and my blood turns cold. "You're different, Delilah." Zane places his good hand on my thigh, cupping it. Fear makes my heart race so hard my vision blurs, but then anger takes over. Rage so pure, so hot, that I grind my teeth.

He’s right. I’m not the woman I used to be. I’m harder. Colder. He sees it too.

Zane’s gaze drags over me, falling between my legs. His hand slips higher, then dips between my thighs. “Did they fuck you right before they drugged you? Or did they drug you and then fuck you?”

My jaw tightens.

“Did you beg? For them to stop? To keep going?” His fingers brush along my inner thigh, moving toward my center delicately. The way a lover would. Like he knows my body and has permission to touch me. “Did you get off each time they fucked you?”

“Get your hands off me,” I grate, unable to contain the tears.

His fingers drive into me so hard I gasp at the sting. More tears burst free, and I scream again as he swirls them inside me, the invasion as cutting as a blade. When he withdraws his hand, he inspects his fingers, looking at the wetness coating them, rubbing it between his fingers before bringing the tips to his mouth. He slides his tongue over them, tasting, and the smile that forms churns my stomach.

“Oh, sweet, innocent Delilah.” He wipes his hand on his shirtsleeve and then stands and backs away, keeping his eyes locked on my face. “We are going to have so much fun.”

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The story continues with

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Cast of Characters

Delilah Gavin – 26, Virgo
Cora Julian – 25, Cancer
Reaper – 35, Virgo
Striker – 30, Gemini
Breaker – 28, Taurus
Viper – 33, Sagittarius
Rune Gavin – 53, Scorpio
Clyde Harlow, 55, Gemini
Zane Devin, 40, Libra
Fallon Byrns, 59, Aries
Commander Maxim, 51, Scorpio
~~Cook, 50, Sagittarius~~
Teacher, 46, Libra
~~Hunter~~
~~Raid~~
~~Sniper~~
~~Seeker~~
~~Caroline Julian~~
~~Drake Julian~~

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Acknowledgements

This was a hard book to write. Much more difficult than Breaker's. It's deeply personal, and full of trauma that left me bleeding some days. Viper is a complex, deep character, and his story needed to be told with care. I hope I succeeded.

Viper is not only the longest book I've ever written, it was complicated and consumed so much of my time and energy day in and day out that I was left exhausted. I spent hours taking notes, writing and rewriting, plotting and planning and trying to figure out how to tell the story.

I've never regretted being a panster more than while writing this book.

Thank you to all the readers who waited for this book to come out. Thank you for your patience and understanding while I struggled with this story and all the things life threw my way while attempting to write a massive book with an unhinged masked man.

Scott, my husband, my heart, and my safe place…

I wouldn't have been able to do this without you. Thank you for talking with me, listening while I rambled on about people who don't exist, for giving me ideas, and for not judging me when I was laughing as I told you about THAT chapter (yes, the one I had to change). Thank you for being my strength when I was full of doubt. For reminding me I wasn't allowed to quit.

Ashley, my book bestie turned real bestie. You have been such a solid rock of support. Not just in my writing career, but in life. Thank you for waiting, sometimes days, before I'd respond to you, and for being patient and kind when I fumbled. For being there and cheering me on while I take this insane journey. Who would have thought that the day we first met in the stockroom, we'd be here?

Clary, what would I do without you? I can't thank you enough. You invested so much time and energy into helping with Viper's book, I can never repay you. Seriously, I can't, but I will promise that when this series is over, your surprisingly dark and violent hunger to end a specific character will be sated.

Kisa. Seriously. You saved my life. La'rina, thank you so much for helping beta this book and for your input and the energy you invested in helping me improve this story.

Thank you to the entire Savage Reader Street Team. Words aren’t adequate for what it feels like to have so many people who love and support my work. I’ve gotten to know so many of you over the last year, and the support this team offers not just me, but to each other is amazing.

And last, the one person who has kept me sane during the last year of my life, Lesley. Your unwavering support and belief in me have kept me anchored on days when I was about to combust. You’ve talked me down from a cliff on more than one occasion. Helped me through the worst imposter syndrome I’ve ever experienced. Listened while I cried about everything from my personal life to writer’s block. You’ve helped shape the Street Team, helped it grow, and spent God knows how much time organizing and helping me with this book. Thank you for talking for hours upon hours about Viper’s story, guiding me through the tough moments, and loving this series so much. You are not just a PA, you're like a sister to me, and sorry, but you’re not allowed to quit, even when I test your patience and your sanity.

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Finding Strength in Love

Steamy romantic suspense author and lover of all things romance.

MEET FANNY LEE SAVAGE, the bestselling romance author known for her suspenseful and steamy stories of characters overcoming trauma and hardships. In her novels, she explores the resilience of the human spirit and the power of love to heal even the deepest wounds.

In the *Guardian Series*, a paranormal romance set in modern times, Ms. Savage combines her love of ancient history and folklore to create a dark new world. Her action-packed *Playhouse Series* immerses readers into the underworld of Miami and the inner workings of the modern-day mob. Her novels are full of sensual romance, dark humor, and edge of your seat suspense.

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